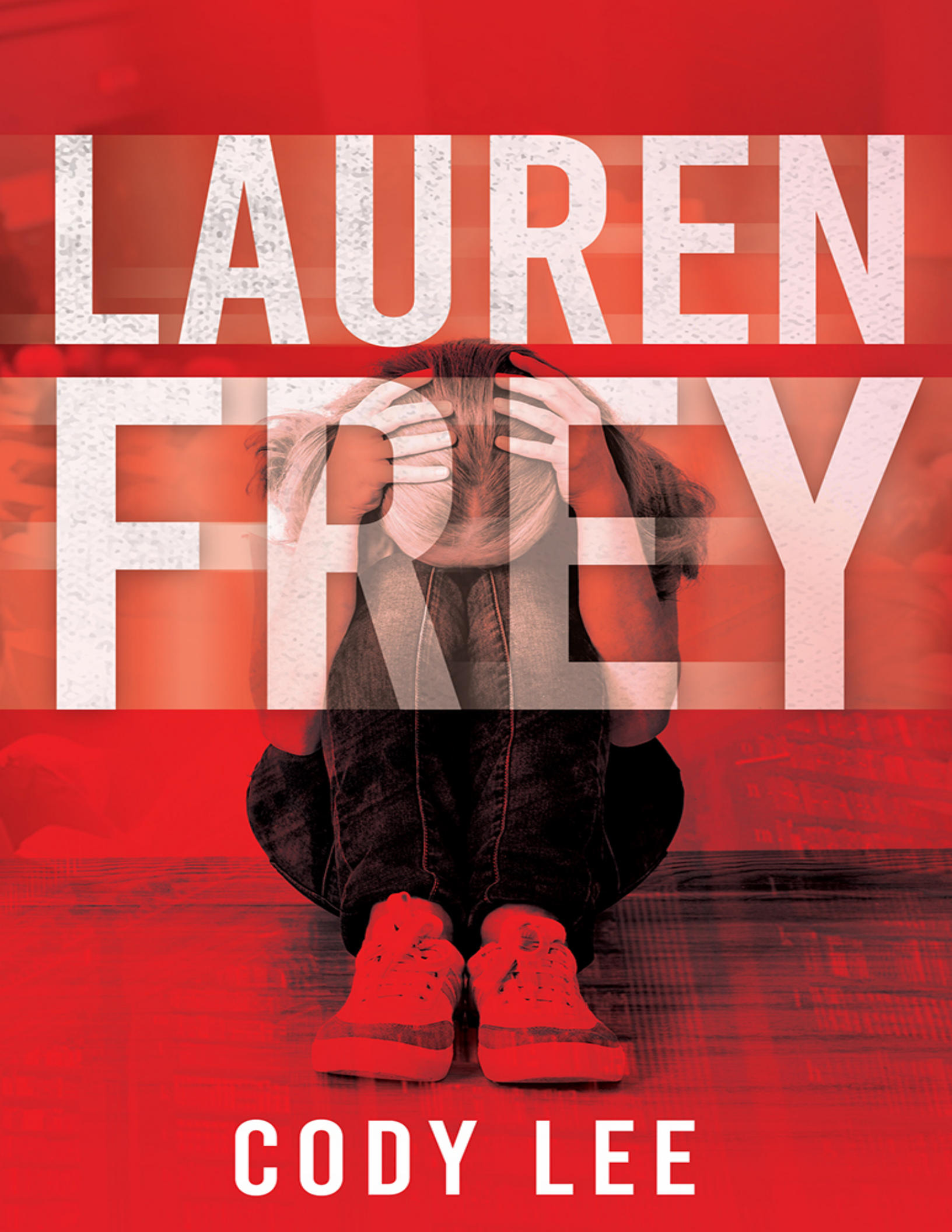
LAUREN FRLEY



CODY LEE

Chapter 1

Ophelia bent over her little garden, humming a tune to herself, as she poured water onto her plants. The bright yellow flowers under her care seemed to have become even lovelier over the past couple of weeks. Ophelia was glad that she had taken the time to plant them. The girls she lived with during the semester would be so excited when they returned home after the holiday.

Although very well known for being a rather gloomy campus, even Grey Arcadia could not retain its grim atmosphere during the summer. The sun seemed almost determined to envelop all of Grey Arcadia in its warm embrace, exposing even the Noctis buildings from the dark shadows that usually covered them. The observation amused her. Even Vampires, it seemed, could not resist the pleasing aesthetic of summer.

Ophelia turned away from her little yellow flowers, which she had raised by hand, to another section of flower that she had tried to raise by magic. In comparison to the one she had tried to raise naturally, this poor group looked rather sickly.

Ophelia raised her hand. Water began to flow beautifully from her hand, and she lowered it to the ground. The ground soaked up the water, as it was supposed to, but the flowers still stubbornly looked unhealthy.

Ophelia sighed. It was true what they said. Magic could not replace nature. They existed side by side, in two different worlds. Completely unaware of each other, and yet intrinsically tied together.

She tapped the watering can with her finger, thinking deeply. Although the water she conjured was not enough to satiate them, it seemed to be enough to keep them alive, only barely. She wondered what was wrong with the water she was producing. Perhaps she could bottle it and have it analyzed somewhere, perhaps on campus.

She stood up. The Witch’s hat she usually wore over her long, golden hair had been discarded today in favor of a more

summertime look, a large sun hat that kept the light of the sun out of her eyes as she worked. The matching sun dress had gotten a little dirt on the front. She would have to change when she got back inside.

She took her water can and set it inside the little box she had set aside to store her gardening things, and turned to look across at the campus. It was hardly recognizable, off season. No Hellraisers wandering the streets, shouting at everyone who would listen that they would bring about the end of the world. No Sentinels of Americana patrolling the streets, doing their best to blame everything wrong with the country on the University. There were no more curfews during night of the Full Moon to avoid Werewolf attacks, no more Knights of the Order of the Dragon calling you an abomination in the eyes of God, no more shouting or fighting or worrying about finals.

No, during the summer Grey Arcadia was almost peaceful. It was a noticeable contrast. It had given her a better understanding of why the locals had such distaste for the student body. She had also noticed that groups that would normally be in conflict with each other, such as the Noctis and the Hellraisers, were a lot more polite and cordial to each other. She supposed that with fewer students on Campus, individuals were more accountable for their actions.

For what it was worth, she had spent her summer supervising the re-decorating of the house on behalf of her housemates and working on the garden. She had no time to involve herself with the drama and never ending conflicts on the streets when she had her personal life to consider. She hadn't met with a lot of new people this summer, especially in her own neighborhood, so she was surprised when first saw the girl.

She was quite the sight.

Her hair was black and ruffled, and seemed not to have been tidied in several days. Her clothes were dark and dirty. Every step she took looked like it took a great effort. She seemed almost as if she was in deep pain.

Something was wrong. Ophelia thought it best to question her. She raised her hand to her hat as she hurriedly stepped across their paved walkway to the street. The gate opened itself as she approached it, and shut again with a creak as she moved past.

"Excuse me, Miss-"

The girl did not seem to hear her, at first. Fearing the worst, perhaps a possession, Ophelia braced herself before trying again.

"Excuse me!"

The girl turned to look at her, and Ophelia's uneasiness vanished in the moment. Those big, black eyes were more frightened and exhausted than any she had seen in her life.

"Y-yes…?" The girl whispered. Ophelia had to restrain herself from reaching out a hand to her. She had to remind herself of her training, and keep her distance from a possible threat. In spite of her appearance, she could very well be dangerous.

"What's happened to you?" Ophelia asked, keeping her voice soft and friendly.

"I'm…. going to college." The girl rasped. She coughed violently. Ophelia stared at her. "I… I'm going to… Grey Arcadia…"

"Grey Arcadia…?" Ophelia repeated, a little puzzled.

"Never heard of it…?" The girl asked. She sounded despondent. Ophelia shook her head.

"No… No" She said. "It's just… this is Grey Arcadia."

The girl looked surprised.

"R-really?"

"Yes!" Ophelia told her. "You're here."

And to her shock, a wide smile fell across the girl's face. "G-good…"

And just like that she began to fall face forward, onto the pavement. Ophelia let out a panicked yell as she lunged forward, forgetting herself entirely to catch her. The girl let out a faint murmur as

Ophelia wrapped her arms around her, breaking her fall. It was a close call, but she managed to hold onto her.

"What happened to you?" Ophelia asked her, shocked. The girl did not answer. She seemed to be completely unconscious.

She looked back to the house, a little conflicted. She knew it was a bad idea to allow anyone into their home, as that would nullify a large portion of the protective enchantments around it. But her instincts told her it was the right thing to do. No one else was home, and she had the feeling that the girl in her arms was nothing more than human.

Ophelia lowered her arms from the girl's body, but it continued hovering in mid-air, several inches above the pavement. She turned back around and began to walk back, and the body of the girl followed close behind.

She walked back up the pavement, up to the door, and into the house. She didn't bother to close the door behind her: it swung shut of its own accord. The instant they stepped into the Living room, the largest, most comfortable couch sprang to life, and on wooden legs made its way over to them and presented itself. Ophelia lay the girl on the couch, which dutifully moved back into position at a slow, comfortable pace.

"Geoffrey!" She called. Before she could even turn around she heard the whoosh that accompanied the arrival of Geoffrey, their house ghost.

"Yes, madame…?"

"Could you go get some wet wash clothes and some fresh clothes for me?" She asked, as her favorite armchair moved and placed itself in front of the couch. "And maybe start cooking a good meal for two…"

"Of course, Madame Alexander." Geoffrey said dutifully. His eyes fell on the girl on the couch.

"I must say," He said ."That perhaps it would best to call the police…?"

Ophelia hesitated. The police were a bit of a joke among Grey Arcadia students, as they had no real power over the forces of darkness or hell. If this girl was the victim of some Hellraiser plot, then it was very likely that Ophelia would be better prepared to help her than the police would be.

"Let's wait until she wakes up until we decide what to do." Ophelia told him.

"As you wish." Geoffrey said. She turned back from him and another WOOSH hit her ears, and once more she was alone with her guest.

The girl had either passed out or simply fallen asleep. She lay completely still on the couch, unmoving as Ophelia took her seat behind her. While she was waiting for Geoffrey she took the opportunity to look over her patient.

She had the look of someone who had been traveling for days. She looked disheveled and dirty, as if she had not had the time or opportunity to take care of herself.

Once Geoffrey brought her the washcloths, she folded one and neatly placed it on her forehead. Before long the smell of eggs, pancakes, and bacon filled the air. It was a little late for breakfast, Ophelia thought, but she supposed Geoffrey knew what he was doing.

As she sat watching the girl rest, she found herself becoming more and more bothered by the dirt and grime. She knew it was probably the wrong thing to do, but she found herself taking an extra wash cloth and rubbing away some of the muck from her cheeks and chins. Her skin was pale and unremarkable. On closer inspection Ophelia was certain that she was nothing more than human.

She was just about to rub down her neck when the girl's eyes fluttered open, and she stared at Ophelia in shock.

"Hello." Ophelia said brightly, as she lowered the wash cloth. "Are you feeling any better?"

The girl looked at her.

"Where-"

"My home on campus." Ophelia told her, proudly. "The campus of Grey Arcadia."

She was pleased to see an excited sparkle in the girl's eyes. "Grey Arcadia…" She whispered. "So it is real."

She closed her eyes, and for a moment Ophelia worried that she had fallen asleep again. But they flickered back open.

"What's your name?" Ophelia pressed.

"I am… Lauren Frey."

"Lauren." Ophelia repeated. "Are you feeling well, Lauren?"

"No."

She was a very soft spoken girl. Ophelia had the impression that even if she had been perfectly happy, she would have answered all of her questions in as few words as possible. She struck her as the shy type.

"Well, you're in good hands." Ophelia assured her. "I'm going to help you… As much as I can. If you need anything, anything at all, you can just ask."

Lauren looked at her. Ophelia felt a strong wave of pity within her when the expression she got was of suspicion, rather than gratitude. It was the look of someone who not used to any form of kindness. Someone had emotionally torn this girl apart.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I want to."

Lauren looked more shocked than anything else. Ophelia sighed.

"Perhaps we can talk more over lunch?" She suggested. She paused as the smell of bacon eat her nose. "Or… perhaps a late breakfast." She bowed politely. "Please excuse me."

She returned a couple of minutes later with two plates. Lauren lay there as Ophelia set the plate on her stomach gently.

“Can you eat in that position?” Ophelia asked.

“I’ll… be fine.” Lauren said. She wrinkled her nose, and grabbed a piece of bacon. She raised it to her mouth and crunched down on it. She closed her eyes, clearly savoring the flavor. Ophelia watched her carefully as she adjusted herself on the couch to better balance the plate. It seemed to be a lot more difficult than it should have.

“What happened to you?” Ophelia questioned. “Were you attacked?”

“Attacked…?” Lauren repeated. “Yes. By my parents.” She took another bite. Ophelia sat, her plate on her lap, far more interested in her guest than the food.

“Your parents…?”

“They drove me out.” Lauren said hoarsely. “After I got my acceptance letter.” She grimaced. “I had to get here all by myself…”

“Right after being accepted into the University?” Ophelia asked, aghast. “So you don’t even have a place to live?”

“No.”

Ophelia lowered her fork to her plate, registering the information. “Well.” She said. “I suppose that is kind of a pickle. But it’s nothing you can’t handle.” She smiled radiantly down at her. Lauren stared back, seemingly unsure of how to respond. She was a bit of a strange girl, Ophelia thought. But she was young.

“What are you hoping to study?” Ophelia asked, her voice sweet and kind. She had hoped to ease Lauren into casual conversation, but to her surprise the question seemed to upset her.

“I… I don’t know.” Lauren said. “I’ve never thought about it.” As if noticing Ophelia’s shocked expression she quickly amended her statement.

“I never thought that I would ever even be considered for a college.” She said. “The idea of me being accepted into one… the thought of actually attending classes…” She shuddered somewhat. “I never SERIOUSLY thought about going… what it would actually be like, and what classes I would need to take…”

Ophelia nodded as if she understood, but in reality she could not understand the girl at all. Her words sounded nothing but babble to her. But Lauren was exhausted and likely hadn't yet recovered. She probably had no idea what she herself was saying.

"You have plenty of time to figure it out." Ophelia told her. "Next semester doesn't start until August… you'll be fine."

Lauren said nothing. She stared down at her full plate as if she were too overwhelmed to hear her. Ophelia sympathized. Coming here the way she had must have been daunting. She could have come from the West Coast for all she knew.

"Are you done eating?" Ophelia asked. Lauren wordlessly handed her plate without looking at her. "Do you need anything else?"

Lauren shook her head.

"Good." Ophelia said. "Get some rest. There's a bathroom down that way when you're feeling ready to clean up. I may not be here when you wake up, but don't worry. I'll be back by six. We'll have dinner and-"

She stopped. Lauren had already closed her eyes and fallen asleep. Ophelia could hardly believe it. She was almost tempted to make sure that she really had fallen asleep before deciding against it.

She stepped back into the kitchen and called for Geoffrey. She handed him their discarded plates and instructed him to keep a close eye on Lauren while she was still in the house. He agreed.

Ophelia had wanted to take a walk after garden work, perhaps have some tea at her favorite shop, but she herself unwilling to leave the house with a guest she knew little about resting in their sitting room. Instead of leaving she decided to get caught up on her weekly letter home. She had been keeping the Coven up to date regarding events at Grey Arcadia over the Summer, although honestly she was not sure why she had been asked to do it. She wrote a little bit about recent administrative changes, about how quiet the Hellraisers had been lately, and how put off she had been how locals she had

befriended in the area distanced themselves from her when they realized she was a Witch of the Noctis.

It was so frustrating, she thought, how so many people like that were forced to take a side. Hellraiser or Noctis. Couldn't they just be left alone?

She continued her letter, mentioning in passing the appearance of Lauren. She wasn't a girl of interest to her Coven, being a human girl who clearly had no magical potential, but Grey Arcadia had been making a concentrated effort to keep a steady stream of human students coming into the University, particularly female ones. Ophelia noted this was likely to keep a steady stream of potential candidates for new witches coming into the University.

She finished her letter, sealed it, and then prepared it for sending. It was not an essential letter, nor one that held particularly sensitive information, so she sent it by post. The more secretive methods of communication available to her would be reserved for emergencies or other serious events.

She spent the rest of her evening reading. The book she had picked up was called '*And Then There Were Dragons*.' By the famed academics Phil and Lucille Langley. It was all about the history of Dragons on Earth.

She found it a fascinating read. She hardly noticed the darkness settling into the room as she read about the rise and fall of the most dangerous creature born on Earth. It was not until that Geoffrey popped in to inform her that Lauren was awake that she set the book aside and got to her feet. She was a little disappointed as she stepped through the door and back into the living room.

Lauren had gone straight into the bathroom. She could hear running water. She instructed Geoffrey to take and clean her filthy things, and sat and waited for her.

She probably should have brought the book with her. She was waiting for quite a while. It took about half an hour before the water

stopped flowing, and a rather wet and still tired looking Lauren stepped out in fresh clothes.

"Oh…" She said, coming to a stop as she saw Ophelia.

"Please, sit down." Ophelia said warmly, pointing to another white chair. Lauren stepped forward, almost a little reluctantly, and then sat down.

"Are you feeling any better?" Ophelia asked politely. As she waited for Lauren to answer, she gave a silent order to Geoffrey to start preparing dinner.

"A little." Lauren admitted. Now that she was clean and fresh faced, Ophelia was able to take in much more of her features.

She was a very petite girl. Standing at perhaps a little over five feet tall, she looked unusually small and skinny for her height. She lacked the musculature of an athlete or lacked the tan that was prevalent among girls that enjoyed being outside. If anything she seemed pale and sickly. Ophelia wondered whether that was due to her journey, or something else in her personal life.

She seemed rather nervous and insecure. She was looking at Ophelia like she expected something terrible to happen. Ophelia felt that she was uncomfortable being in a stranger's care.

"Well, one step at a time, as they say." Ophelia said. "I'm sure you're hungry again. Dinner will be ready in about half an hour."

"I-"

Lauren seemed to struggle a little bit, before bending her head. "Thank you. "You are very kind."

"I suppose." Ophelia said, elegantly crossing her legs. "We need to discuss what has brought you to Grey Arcadia."

She carefully watched Lauren's response. Lauren opened her mouth, and then shut it again. It seemed that she had no idea what to say.

"I… got a letter." Lauren stammered, glancing down at the small bag she had left lying at the foot of the couch. Ophelia bent over and

opened a small pouch in the side. As she had indicated, there was a small letter in the side.

It was indeed a Grey Arcadia acceptance letter.

“Congratulations…” Ophelia said, as she flipped the letter over. “You have been accepted into Grey Arcadia.”

She handed the letter back to her, and Lauren took it from her, hands shaking slightly.

“So it’s not fake?” She asked anxiously. “It’s not a joke?”

“Of course it wouldn’t be.” Ophelia said, surprised. She had never even heard of someone faking an acceptance letter.

Lauren took in a deep sigh and leaned her head backwards. She seemed to be thinking deeply.

“So I really was accepted.” She said quietly. “I really am going to college.”

She tilted her head forward, and then back down to the floor. “What am I going to do now?”

Ophelia leaned forward. “Well, what do you want to do?”

“What do I want…” She repeated, as if she had never considered the question herself at all. She shook her head.

“I’m not really sure.” She said. “But I knew I had to… I knew I had to come.” She gripped the letter in her hand tightly. “I had to.”

“I see.” Ophelia said, although she honestly felt as if the girl had put herself in a very poor position coming to Grey Arcadia with no real plan. Ophelia was almost certain that she would not last the semester. “What do you know about Grey Arcadia?”

“Next to nothing.” Lauren told her. “Other than what they sent me.”

Ophelia had to stop herself from sighing despondently. “I see.” She said.

“What do you think I should study?” Lauren asked her. She quickly amended her statement before Ophelia could even answer. “What are YOU studying?”

“I?” Ophelia asked, surprised that she had even asked. “I’m a Witch.”

“A Witch?” Lauren repeated, confused. Ophelia sighed. This girl was completely ignorant of what she had gotten herself into.

“Yes, a Witch.” Ophelia said, trying to be patient.. “I’m studying magic here.”

“Magic?” She sounded even more baffled. “This is a magic school?”

“The best in the United States.” Ophelia said, sniffing. “Not that that’s saying much…”

“But I don’t know anything about magic!” Lauren protested, wide eyed. “The Brochure didn’t-“

“There are.” Ophelia said, interrupting her. “More than enough opportunities from someone like you here.” Ophelia was watching Lauren’s reactions very closely. It was not unheard of for those who lived ordinary lives to receive acceptance letters to Grey Arcadia, but generally they would have had at least the passing knowledge of what the University was known for. Lauren seemed almost ready to fall into hysterics over a basic piece of information she really should already been made aware of. Ophelia decided that now was probably not the time to tell her that Grey Arcadia had the highest murder per capita rate of any University in the country.

“I think.” Ophelia said, ending the conversation. “That dinner is ready. Pray, come.”

She stood up, and Lauren stared after her, wide eyed. It took her a moment to get to her feet and walk after her. Ophelia felt a sense of pity for her as she heard Lauren moan in pain with each heavy step of her foot. Perhaps she was being a little hard on her. She was still, after all, exhausted.

Geoffrey was nowhere to be seen, but he had set aside two steaming hot plates of food laying before them. Lauren turned around with a smile to face Lauren, who was looking at the table in a very pleasantly surprised sort of way.

“Please.” Ophelia said. “Sit down.”

She pulled a chair for Lauren, and she sat down at her place. Ophelia walked around the table and sat down as well, across from her. She looked up and smiled.

“It looks wonderful!” Lauren exclaimed, her eyes shining.

“Eat up!” Ophelia said cheerfully. The change in environment seemed to have done a lot to cheer her up. She seemed almost like a completely different person.

“This is delicious!” Lauren told her. “What’s in it?”

Ophelia kept smiling, although she did not answer. Truthfully, she had no idea what Geoffrey had made. “I’ll have to ask the cook and pass the recipe on to you.”

Lauren lowered her, surprised. “Really?” She asked, surprised. “You would do that?”

“Of course.” Ophelia said, a little taken aback at how surprised she was.

“Wow.” Lauren said. She sounded very happy. “Thank you….” She bent her head over the dish. She seemed to have turned a little red.

“Do you like cooking?” Ophelia asked.

“Oh yes.” Lauren said immediately. “Very much. I’ve been cooking since I was very young. My parents would always get so drunk they would forget to cook, and I-“

She stopped speaking, looking a little horrified, and fell silent. Ophelia once again felt a strong surge of pity for the other girl.

“Please, speak freely.” Ophelia urged her. “If you feel you need to-“

“No, no.” Lauren said, looking very embarrassed now, as she shook her head. “No, I shouldn’t have said anything-“

“Lauren.” Ophelia said, her voice firm. Lauren stopped mid-sentence, looking surprised. “If you have something you want to say- about your life, about your parents, about how you feel… you should say it. That’s what I think is best for you.”

“You… you do?”

“I do.” Ophelia said. “Please. What was that about your parents?”

She was genuinely curious. She folded her hands in her lap and stared at Lauren expectantly. Lauren seized up, and then stared down at her plate.

“No, it was nothing…” Lauren said quietly. “Forget it.”

And she said nothing more. Ophelia had been right. She had been an abuse victim. Or at the very least severely neglected. No wonder she had jumped at the chance to come to Grey Arcadia, despite not fully understanding how dangerous the University was.

“I’ll get you that recipe.” She said, immediately following up with a command to Geoffrey to write it down. Lauren froze a little bit, as if hardly daring to believe it, before breaking out into a smile. It looked almost awkward, as if she weren’t used to doing it. Ophelia rather thought it would be good if she did it more often. “But first, I think we need to talk about your prospects here.”

“My… prospects?”

“You want an education, yes?” Ophelia asked, her voice gentle and reassuring. Lauren bit her lip. Although Ophelia was doing her best to break the news to her in the best way possible, it seemed that Lauren was quite perceptive and could see right through her.

“You need to find a place to live.” Ophelia said gently. “Am I right in saying that you haven’t found a place yet?”

Lauren did not answer.

“Well, you are very fortunate.” Ophelia said. “Rent for human students is heavily subsidized by the University. As long as you work a part time job… any part time job… you should have no problems living here.”

“A job…?” Lauren repeated. “Me?” She seemed to faint at the very idea.

“You’re a human girl.” Ophelia said, patiently. “You’ll find something. There are plenty of demons who will pay to simply have you around.

Now, you want to be careful and not get yourself into any dangerous situations, but I am more than willing to let you stay with me until you find your way."

"Staying-" Lauren stuttered a little bit. "You're letting me stay?"

"Until the semester begins." Ophelia confirmed, nodding. "Until my housemates return, I see no reason to ask you to leave. However I must warn you… they will not take so kindly to a human on our territory as I am. You must be gone be September 1st. Or I will be forced to evict you. Are we clear?"

Again Lauren seemed to seize up, freezing, clearly deciding how to answer. Ophelia waited patiently for a response.

"I… will." Lauren said, squaring her face up with determination. "I will!" She said again, loudly and more affirmatively. Ophelia smiled to herself, as her looked down at the oven. It seemed Geoffrey had taken it upon himself to bake them cookies.

Chapter 2

Lauren Frey could hardly believe her luck. As she sat across from the table, eating her cookie and watching Ophelia as she talked, she couldn't help but feel like she had finally taken her first step into living her very own life.

For as long as she could remember, she had been completely alone. Her parents, due to a lack of financial stability, had never allowed her to visit other people her age or go about unsupervised. As a result, she had always felt a strong sense of being completely isolated from her peers. For the longest time, she had felt she had been left behind by everyone she had ever known. But a brand new feeling was welling up inside of her as she listened to Ophelia talk.

Ophelia had not abandoned her. She had supported her, given her a place to rest her head and had even given her reasonably good advice.

The journey here had been horrible. But in the end it had been everything she had ever dreamed. She had not even been here a

day, and she believed she had found the one thing she had craved all throughout her childhood and teenage years. A true friend.

Lauren thought of nothing else as Ophelia led her to the guest room and showed her around. She suggested that Lauren read a little if she needed to help wind down. Lauren thanked her, but didn't even try. She fell asleep again the instant her head hit the pillow.

The next day, she freshened up, changed clothes, and then ended back downstairs to where Ophelia was waiting.

"Ah, you're up." She said. "I was worried you would sleep in."

"No, no." Lauren said quickly. "I would never-"

Ophelia laughed. Lauren felt herself let out a small smile.

"I'm just teasing." Ophelia said. "I didn't want to have breakfast without you. Come."

They stepped into the kitchen to find, once again, that two plates had been set out for them.

"I've taken the liberty of looking for places that might take you on." Ophelia said. "I thought that you might want an idea of who is hiring."

She raised her hand to reveal a folded up piece of paper. She lay it on the table and it sprung open, unfolding itself rapidly, expanding to cover the entire free surface of the table.

"This." Ophelia said. "Is a map of the Campus of Grey Arcadia."

Lauren stared down at it. The first thing she noticed was that different spots on the map were labelled with different colors. The two most prominent being red and black.

"What are these colors?"

"These colors represent parts of the city that are controlled by different factions." Ophelia explained, trailing her finger over the paper. "As you can see, the vast majority is divided between two factions. The Black represents the Noctis, while the Red represents the Hellraisers. Being human, I would suggest…"

She circled her finger around the black colored part of the map.

"To focus on the Noctis." She said. "Hellraisers, you see, fundamentally despise humans and are actively fighting to bring about their extinction. Going near Hellraiser operated businesses and near their homes would be deadly for you. You will be much safer traveling through Noctis territory… during the day, at any rate."

She looked up to see an open mouthed Lauren staring down at the map in horror.

"This is a school for monsters, Lauren." Ophelia reminded her gently. "Human students are a minority. The culture here is very different from what you may have expected from a normal school. The goal of this university is to create a learning environment where all intelligent creatures can go to learn, together. Regardless of who they are or what their alignments are…." Lauren did not look reassured. Ophelia decided to try a different tactic.

"It will not nearly be so overwhelming once you become used to it." Ophelia promised. She turned back down to the paper. "The Hellraisers are trouble, but we are very well prepared to deal with them if necessary."

She pointed out a couple of locations on the map. "I thought you might want to start here." She said. "The Night Owl Books… The owner will sometimes hire humans. I quite like her. And I saw that the flower shop I go to is hiring. And The Bad Apple is always looking for people this season… lots of people working for the University still drop by there over the summer."

"The Bad Apple?"

"It's a Tea House." Ophelia said. "One of the finest in the world. For witches, at any rate. Our tastes aren't the same as yours, I'm afraid…. But they serve people as well. Just don't accept anything that's meant for witches, while you're there. You might poison yourself."

Lauren was staring at her again.

“You talk about Witches… as if it’s dangerous for me to be around them.” Lauren said, her voice slow and considerate. Ophelia sighed, averting her eyes.

“We are, sweetie.” She said. “We are.” She looked back down at the map. “I was thinking that you could drop by the Bookstore and the Flower shop, and then we can meet up at the Bad Apple. Does that sound good to you?”

Lauren felt her lips going dry. She had expected Ophelia to guide her through every step of the process, and walk her through these strange, dangerous streets herself. But it appeared she had no intention of doing so. Lauren wanted to ask her to come with her, but knew that she would be quickly, but politely, rebuked.

“It’s settled, then.” Ophelia said brightly. “I’ll meet you at the Bad Apple around ten, then.”

“O-okay….”

“Are you nervous?”

Lauren gave a small start. “A… little….”

“Don’t be.” Ophelia assured her. “You’ll be fine as long as you stay away from Hellraiser territory. Just don’t get lost and you’ll be fine.”

Easier said than done, Lauren thought to herself faintly as she stepped over the threshold and out into the street. The bright, shining sun hit her eyes with such force she had to block it with her hand, wincing a little bit. It was a bright summer day. She remembered how Ophelia had told her that the Noctis wouldn’t attack her during the day. She tried to convince herself that with the sunny weather, they would be even more averse to coming after her.

She found herself feeling increasingly uneasy as she stepped forward onto the sidewalk. She turned back around to Ophelia’s house, feeling an intense longing to go back inside. She looked at it for a while, before deciding that she needed to keep moving. She would come back after she got her job.

She turned back again and felt her heart squeeze in her chest. She felt a strong reluctance to continue walking, to take that next step.

She took one. And then another.

She had to do this. She had to stay. She had to go to school, she had to stay away from her parents. She wanted to meet more people like Ophelia, who didn't judge or hate her for being strange and awkward. Lauren had to keep moving. She had to do this. She was so close…

Her heart was beating rapidly in her chest as she made her way down the street. She kept expecting to see more signs of magic all around her. Owls delivering letters, fire bursting out of nowhere, and things moving of their own accord.

Despite her expectations, the streets around her seemed perfectly normal. She saw very few people as she walked, and those that she did see seemed perfectly normal. At a distance, at any rate. Witches, she supposed, could easily pass as human. She would never have suspected that Ophelia was one unless she had been told. And it was still light out. And it was summer. There were plenty of reasons why nothing would happen to her.

No matter how hard she tried to convince herself though, and how quiet the street seemed, she felt a crippling sense of unease welling up within her. The same sort of worry and fear that prevented her from succeeding. If she allowed herself to even consider giving up, she would do so.

She had to keep doing this. She had to keep doing this. She had to-

She came to a stop at a crossroads and looked up. Most street signs back home had been a green, emboldened with white letters. These ones were different. The ones here were completely black, with white letters.

Lauren stared at them for a while, recalling the map that Ophelia had shown her, and cast a look down the street. She took notice of the stores and businesses lining the road, and the similar colors adorning all of their signs and decorations. It made her think that

maybe, perhaps, the colors marked that these were Noctis owned businesses, and that Hellraisers should stay away. She had read about similar things happening in Germany, in the Town with Bent Necks.

She was unwilling to verify her theory though, and turned her attention back to finding the bookstore. She recalled the map again, took a left, and set off down the street. She cast looks at the stores she passed by. She found herself blanching at the sights she caught through the window. The skeletons of tiny animals raced around as if they were alive. A tall statue of a man with a bird's head turned to look at her as she walked by. And a symbol above a door representing two snakes devouring each other writhed and squirmed realistically. She found that last one nauseating, and turned her head away from it.

She found herself a little bit relieved when she fell outside The Night Owl bookstore. To her eye it was no different than any other bookstore she had been to. She could see rows and rows of books from the outside, and there was nothing to truly indicate that it was owned by a witch. Other than, perhaps, the little mascot character on the sign, which was a rather cutesy depiction of a large owl flying through the night sky, a large book clutched in its talons.

It was a rather dark bookstore, though. It didn't even seem to be open. Lauren stared at the door, finding herself wondering whether she should even try to enter it. If it was locked, then there was nothing she could do…

She recoiled as the doors of the bookstore slowly slid open. She watched as they opened wide, as far as they could go, and then stopped. As if they were beckoning her in. Lauren found herself feeling even more erratic and nervous as she stared past the doors.

What was she waiting for? Why could she not bring herself to take… just… one step…?

She took one, tentative step forward, and then another. Another one followed after that, and then another. Step after step she took, until

she found herself at the threshold of the door. She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The doors slammed shut behind her. Lauren threw a frantic look behind her, but before she could even panic candles set on pedestals on either side of her sprung alight. This caught her by such surprise that she forgot all about the doors and turned back around. The candles cast an eerie, intimidating glow around that illuminated the immediate area. They did not, however, cast the room in full light. The vast majority of the shelves were covered in almost complete darkness. Now that she was in the room, she noticed that the windows, which she had initially thought were made of the typical glass, was actually a one way mirror. No light shone into the room at all, although she had been able to see inside. She could not understand what purpose that could possibly serve. Perhaps it would make more sense if the owner wanted to look out, into the street. But why would she want the entire room to be cast in darkness?

Lauren looked around the dark room. She wasn't quite sure where to go or who to talk to. She saw no other patrons, and no employees. Simply rows and rows of neatly organized bookshelves that towered to the ceiling. Now that she thought about it, the room did seem a little bit big… bigger than it should have been, going by the appearance of the outside.

She took a step forward towards the bookshelf and reached out a hand towards it. She had been planning on simply reaching forward and grabbing hold of a book at random, but once again she was caught off guard. More candles, directly in front of her, suddenly lit and exposed more of the room to light.

Lauren stopped and looked at the candles ahead of her. She took a tentative step forward. And then two more.

All of a sudden the light behind her extinguished itself. She turned around, expecting something to jump out at her, but there was nothing. The only light that surrounded her now was of the newly lit candles.

She feared for a brief moment that these would go out as well, and that she would be left at the mercy of whatever was lurking in between these shelves. But the light that surrounded her did not go out. In fact, it seemed as if the rows of books on either side of her were fairly well illuminated.

She took another few steps forward, and once more new candles came alight, as the ones behind her fainted into nothing. Feeling she understood the process now, she took a step back. The candles behind her once again came alight.

So they were automatic. She realized. They lit themselves when she came near. It had simply taken her off guard because ordinary candles didn't light themselves. She took a couple of more tentative steps forward, and another row of lights lit up

Although she could now see, it did little to calm her nerves. If anything the seemingly endless rows upon rows of shelves full of books somehow seemed even more intimidating. And the fact that she had not seen any patrons or employees exacerbated that feeling.

She took another step forward, looking around aimlessly. Where was the desk? Who was she supposed to talk to about a job?

She turned her head to the left, peering into the dark row of books. Outside of the range of the candlelight, it was pitch black. This wasn't normal. Lauren thought to herself, as she turned back around and saw two gigantic eyes staring at her.

She jumped backwards in fright as the eyes blinked at her. Lauren took a step back as a long, thin leg stepped out of the shadows.

"Can I help you?"

Lauren stared up at the woman, completely taken aback. Her first thought was that she had no idea how old she was. She looked fairly young, but the way she spoke and carried herself made her think of someone much older.

Her second thought was that there was no way this woman could be human. Those gigantic, wide, staring eyes were unnaturally large

and round, and she did not seem to need to blink as often as normal people.

"Did I startle you?" The woman asked politely, tilting her head to the side. Lauren found herself wincing as the neck on the woman bent far farther than should be possible.

"Y-yes…" Lauren managed to choke out. She wanted to avert her eyes from the unnerving woman, but a deep paranoid fear welled up within her. A horrible feeling inside told her that if she looked away from this woman, she would be in deep trouble.

"There is no need to be afraid." The woman said. "I mean you no harm… although I do wonder what has brought you here."

She spoke succinctly, and to the point.

"Well… I'm looking for a job." Lauren said. "And…"

"Aaaaah." The Woman said. Her head straightened again. "I see." She stared down at her, as if sizing her up.

"But why would a human girl want to work here, of all places?" She asked.

"I was… told you might hire me." Lauren said. "By… uh, Ophelia…?"

She had hoped that bringing up Ophelia's name would turn the conversation around, but the woman did not even react.

"My apologies. You have been misinformed." She bent her head. "I no longer hire humans. Too many of them disappear, or cause other problems. The last girl I hired was killed. I found her body torn to shreds one night. I can't in good conscience hire another human."

"Oh." Lauren said. "I see." She struggled to wrap her hear around this information. "Is…. the University really so dangerous for people?"

The Woman stared at her. Lauren felt herself start to shirk back.

"You are an inquisitive one." The woman said. "And very young. Have you only just arrived in Grey Arcadia?"

“I have.” Lauren said. “That’s why I need a job. So I can… so I can live.” She felt herself tighten up with embarrassment. Those wide, staring eyes made her feel like prey for a hungry animal.

“I see.” The woman said. She stared at her for a while longer, before turning back around to her bookshelf. Lauren feared for a moment that she was preparing to walk away, but instead she raised her hand to a bookshelf, and straightened a book.

“Grey Arcadia.” She said quietly. “Is no place for humans.”

Lauren stared at her, transfixed. The back of her head looked bizarre. It seemed that each strand of hair was longer and thicker than should be natural. She was trying to puzzle out what it reminded of when the woman turned her head.

Lauren tried to hold back a scream. The head did not stop twisting until it came turned all the way around, looking right back at her. Those unsettling wide eyes were staring at her again, although the front of her body was still facing the shelf.

“Humans.” She said. “Must show great caution if they wish to attend school here. It is not a very safe campus, even for those of us with strong ties to the Noctis.”

“The… Noctis?” Lauren repeated, timidly. The eyes stared deep into her, and she found herself recoiling. The woman stared at her.

“You truly do not know what you have gotten yourself into.” The woman said quietly. “As I told you before, I cannot in good conscience hire you on for my bookshop. In fact, now that I have spoken to you, I firmly believe that you should not be attending school here at all.”

Lauren found herself trembling slightly. Her heart was racing. She had come all the way here. She had come to Grey Arcadia, she had sacrificed everything in the hopes that she would find something wild and different. But even now, now that she was here, she was being told the same exact thing she always had.

“Please excuse me.” The woman said, bending her head. “And please take care of yourself.” And she drifted off. Lauren could feel

her heart bursting furiously in her chest. She felt a strong anxiety welling up within her. She needed to leave.

She turned from whence she had come and opened the door. She had not been in the room all that long at all, but the blinding light of the sun caused her to wince. It did very little to comfort her as she leaned up against the building, unwilling to move or even consider her next move. Her mind was in a panic. She had been shut down without a second thought. It had not even been a real interview. She wasn't worth the time or trouble. Even with Ophelia's help, she had not even come close.

She still had another stop before dropping by the Bad Apple, but she couldn't bring herself to move on. She stood there, outside the bookstore, unable to bring herself to even take another step forward. If she had anywhere to go, she would have simply given up and gone home. The idea of returning to Ophelia's place, and having to admit that she had failed… the idea terrified her.

No, it would be better to keep moving. Onward, to the flower shop….

The thought made her feel nauseous, but she had no choice. She made her way down the street with tiny, pained steps. She had regained control of herself: She had convinced herself that she had to keep going. But she still felt shaky and insecure in herself. She couldn't do this. She couldn't do this. She couldn't do this.

She found herself standing outside the shop, staring up at the little sign. Unlike the first, which had been rather dark and foreboding, this one looked a lot more bright and cheerful. Colorful letters surrounded a little cartoon goat munching on some flowers spelling out the words 'Fiora's Flowers.'

This caused her to relax somewhat. It seemed rather like an ordinary flower shop. She took in a deep breath, built up her courage, and stepped inside.

She had to stop herself from gasping. A beautiful array of flowers were set out right in front of her, displaying a stunning variety of

color. She found herself forgetting why she was there entirely. She was so transfixed by the colors, that she found herself stepping forward towards it.

"Oh!"

She stopped, recoiling slightly, as she turned. A girl with auburn air was looking at her from behind the counter.

"I'm so sorry!" The girl said apologetically, bowing her head. "I didn't see you come in…. Um. Excuse me."

She turned back around and hurriedly adjusted a number of things behind the shelves. Lauren could not fully make out what she was doing, but found herself watching. The girl, seemingly becoming more and more flustered, seemed to knock some bags and pots over as she hurriedly turned around and stepped around the counter.

Lauren raised her hand to her mouth to hide her shocked expression: what should have been an ordinary human leg was goatlike, and completely bare. The girl shook her head, seemingly not noticing a thing, as she approached Lauren, smiling.

"How can I help you?" The girl asked brightly. Lauren could not bring herself to meet her eyes. She averted them to the flowers that she had been admiring instead. She could feel the smile fading from the girl's face.

"Um, is something the matter…?" The girl asked, somewhat timidly, tilting her head. Lauren turned back to face her, and felt herself recoiling. Hidden beneath that mane of hair were a couple of tiny horns.

"No." Lauren said quietly, trying to speak normally and hide her discomfort. The girl stared at her, and Lauren thought it was a rather icy look. The previous warmness in her voice had already evaporated. Lauren knew this reaction very well. It was how most people behaved when they realized that she wasn't normal. She felt that familiar sinking feeling in her own heart.

"I came here to ask about a job."

The girl blinked. “A… job….?” She looked more surprised than anything. Lauren nodded, casting the briefest of glances to the girl’s goat like legs.

There was a very awkward silence.

“A job.” The girl repeated. “You want to work here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I need a job.”

“You need-“

Lauren wasn’t looking at her now. She turned her attention back to the flower. She had known what was going to happen before she had even left Ophelia’s House. She had not been surprised at the bookstore, and she would not be surprised now.

“I’m sorry, but we’re not hiring right now.” The girl said, a little bit too quickly. “Um, will that be all?”

“Yes.” Lauren said. “Thank you.”

She found herself turning around and heading for the door. Her heart was racing wildly in her chest. Once more she had been completely shut down, but at the very least it was over, and she could head over to the Bad Apple.

She quickly pushed the door open and stepped back out into the street. She was so happy to have her job search be over for the day that she almost took off into the street, straight to the Bad Apple. However, before she did she felt a strong urge to turn back and give another longing glance to the display of flowers through the glass door.

Lauren felt her heart seize up in her chest as she pulled away, the door quietly sliding shut. She could barely think as she backed away from the door and turned.

She was panicking now. Nothing seemed more important to her than to get away as quickly as possible. The few passerby in the streets,

the shops themselves, the looming university buildings she could make out in the distance. All she could think of was finding somewhere, anywhere, she could be alone.

She came to a very clean, brightly lit alleyway off of the main street and she immediately found herself heading towards it. She stepped past a pipe, and after ensuring that no one was in the alley with her, leaned up against the wall.

She was completely alone. She was safe. She would be fine. She was secure.

No, she was not secure. Anyone could come up and…. And…. And….

There was no one here. There was no one here. There was no one to talk down to her, or refuse her, reject her, humiliate her, upset her. No, she was alone. The same as always. She would be fine. She would be fine. She would be fine.

But no matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise, the reality of her situation forced her back to the truth of the matter.

No, she was not fine. She was not in a safe place. She was out in public, in a place that she really understood nothing about. She had no job, and what was worse… she had no place to go. Ophelia had made it very clear that she expected her to find her own place before semester began.

What if every day was like this? What if every day she put herself out there, only to be rejected again and again? What if… what if… what if…? She couldn't find a place to live before the semester began? What if she couldn't keep up with the others? What if she starved? What if she collapsed from exhaustion? What if she froze to death over the winter? What if… what if…

She needed to calm herself down. Her mind was becoming increasingly frantic. She would never be able to figure this out if she let herself continue to panic.

She needed to find someplace she felt secure. Someplace where no one would bother her, or harass her at all. She needed to find…

A place….

Wasn’t that supposed to be where she was, though? Had she not left her parents behind to come here? Wasn’t she supposed to be safe and happy already….? Wasn’t this supposed to be her special place? Wasn’t going to college supposed to fix all of her problems…?

The school year hadn’t started yet. She hadn’t even begun her life as a student. She hadn’t even begun to live her life here yet. All she would have to do going forward is stay away from those places… that was all. Wasn’t her life better now, now that her parents weren’t in it? Hadn’t she already met one person, a single person, that didn’t feel repulsed by her?

That person was waiting for her now. Lauren realized. Ophelia was waiting at the Bad Apple… They had made plans to meet there. Maybe Ophelia would… maybe Ophelia would help her again. Maybe she would be there. Maybe she would be her friend. Maybe she would help. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

She felt herself calm down slightly, her breath hitched in her throat. But what if Ophelia didn’t help? What if she turned her out onto the street? What then? What would she do next?

No… Maybe. Maybe Ophelia would help her. And until she knew for sure, she wouldn’t panic about it. She couldn’t panic about it. If Ophelia was there for her, if she continued to be there for her… Things might just work out.

She pushed herself off the wall and tried to calm herself further as she took apprehensive steps back out into the street. She had to talk to Ophelia. She had to go back. If she had just a little bit more time, then…

Lauren’s feet touched down onto the sidewalk, and she turned left and continued down the street. Although her mind was still running wild with concerns and worries, she now had a concrete idea of what she wanted to do next. Talk to Ophelia. Then… then…. Then… things would be alright.

A suit of armor turned its head to look at her as she walked by. She tried not to meet its gaze, or take notice of the large axe it was brandishing in its hands. Her feet moved a little bit quicker, and she reached the end of the street and crossed.

She walked a little bit farther, and came to a stop to a rather well lit sign. The Bad Apple. A large, living crow was sitting on a perch on top of the sign, staring at her beadily with its black eyes. It opened its beak and let out a caw to her.

Lauren walked towards it, staring up at it with interest.

"What a pretty bird." She commented. The bird stopped, its beak half open, almost as if it were taken aback by the unexpected compliment. It closed its beak and stared down at her. She turned away from it and stepped in front of the door. She hesitated. Thoughts and fears of being stopped by someone once she stopped inside overwhelmed her. She turned her head to the window and saw Ophelia waving frantically at her. She suddenly felt a bit braver, and opened the door.

Lauren found herself standing in one of the most lavishly decorated rooms she had ever seen. Bright green colors adorned the walls and seemed to glow with an unearthly, beautiful light. The tables were large and grand, but conspicuously empty for the most part. A couple of cloaked women sat at the bar, conversing among themselves. Lauren walked past them and sat down across from Ophelia.

"You're early." Ophelia said, beaming at her, before casting her head back down to the vast array of papers she had spread out on the table before them. "It went well, I take it…?"

Lauren sighed gloomily. Ophelia clicked her tongue.

"Pity." She said. "Well, I suppose you have plenty of time to figure things out… Do you want anything to drink?"

She focused on her papers and Lauren felt her breath hitch in her throat. She felt as if she were about to cry.

"What would you like?" Ophelia asked conversationally.

“Ummm… Green tea?”

Ophelia nodded. She stuck out her hand horizontally, outside of their booth. Lauren barely had time to wonder what she was doing when she had a bit of a shock. A silvery transparent figure rose up from the floor next to them and bowed.

“Your order?” The ghost asked. It had a droning, monotonous voice.

“A green tea for my guest.” Ophelia said. “And for myself… perhaps some more Night Nectar?”

The ghost bowed. “It will be done…” And it sank back into the floor.

Lauren was staring. Ophelia chuckled.

“Oh, Noctis owned businesses often employ ghosts.” She explained. “It may be why you’re having problems finding a job… a lot of ghosts simply want something to do.”

“I haven’t seen any ghosts.” Lauren said, surprised.

“Well, they don’t show themselves if they’re not needed.” Ophelia explained patiently. “The living have a natural revulsion to them, you see… it reminds us all how our own deaths are inevitable.”

Ophelia set aside her papers as the ghost swiftly returned with their drinks. He set the green tea in front of Lauren first, and then a dark yellow liquid in front of Ophelia.

“Thank you, sir.” Ophelia said politely, as the ghost disappeared. She turned her head down at her glass and examined it thoroughly. “This looks delicious.”

“Maybe I should have ordered it too.” Lauren said, gazing at Ophelia’s glass enviously.

“Oh, no no no.” Ophelia said, quickly. “No, this is… um, this would be dangerous for you to drink.”

She gestured to the large, apple shaped sign that was barely visible from the window. “The name Bad Apple is a warning, actually. A girl came in here when they first opened and ordered an Apple Tea. She didn’t disclose the fact that she was human, so they served her

something that caused her to fall into a deep sleep. It took them three days to figure out how to get her to wake up."

"That's horrible!" Lauren said, aghast. She looked down at her own tea in revulsion.

"They're a bit more careful these days." Ophelia said, laughing. "I wouldn't worry. Plenty of humans come here… you're probably the second most common demographic other than Witches."

"What else comes here?"

"Well, anyone affiliated with the Noctis is welcome." Ophelia said, casually. "So you have witches… vampires… European Werewolves… and humans. We're also fine with Olympian creatures, like Satyrs or Centaurs… but they tend to be pretty pastoral. A Hellraiser would be thrown out."

Lauren gripped the tea in her hand and cradled it, still unwilling to take a sip. "What are these… Hellraisers…?" She asked. "The name keeps coming up, and I…"

"Don't know what they are?" Ophelia said kindly. Lauren nodded. Ophelia took a sip of her black nectar.

"The Hellraisers." She said. "Are comprised of Devils and their worshippers. They openly reject everything that is beautiful and good about our world and want to see it all burn. I suppose humans would describe them as true anarchists."

"But what kind of creature are they?"

"Witches." Ophelia said, to Lauren's great surprise. "And humans."

"Witches?" Lauren repeated, shocked. "But you-"

"I am a witch, yes." Ophelia said, quietly. "And you are a human. But I, and many other witches, find the Hellraisers utterly abhorrent. You, being an ordinary human girl who has done nothing but live her life, are everything they cannot stand."

"There are witches and humans that support the Hellraisers?" Lauren asked, shocked. She noticed the hooded figures at the bar casting looks towards her, but she paid them no mind.

“Support?” Ophelia repeated. “The Hellraisers have always been led by witches. And witches are always born from humans. In a lot of ways, we are the foundation for their movement on Earth.” She sounded bitter, and disgusted. Lauren leaned in closer.

“What movement?” She asked. “What do they want?”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t talk about this.” Ophelia said. “Not in public, at any rate.” She seemed rather uneasy, and unwilling to talk further. Lauren turned around to see the hooded figures watching them carefully. A feeling of unease welled up within her. She felt as if she were being judged.

“Yes, let’s.” She said quickly. Without even thinking about it she raised the glass to her lips and took a sip. She lowered it again, staring at it wide eyed before looking back up at Ophelia.

“This is the best tea I’ve ever had!” She exclaimed. Ophelia laughed and took a sip of her own drink.

They left soon after that. Ophelia gathered her things and got to her feet. Lauren was quick to follow suit.

“Are you…. going home?” Lauren asked, a little bit reluctantly.

“No, not yet.” Ophelia said. “I wanted to take a walk around town. Care to join me?”

“Yes!” Lauren blurted out, a little bit too quickly. Upon noticing Ophelia’s raised eyebrow she blushed.

“I… I don’t know where I should try next…”

“I see.” Ophelia said. “Well, neither do I. But I’m sure we’ll find something.”

Lauren followed her to the front door and they stepped out into the street together. Lauren accidently hit the closing door with her toe and jumped, alarmed. Ophelia turned around and gave her a wide smile. In the bright summer sun she looked positively radiant. Lauren felt a strange longing well up within her.

I wish I could be just like her.

“How about I show you around?” Ophelia suggested. “I feel really bad I couldn’t do it right away…. I feel almost like I threw you to the werewolves.”

It took Lauren a moment to realize she was just using an expression. Ophelia, noticing her surprise, elaborated.

“Oh, there are werewolves on campus.” She said. “But… uh, they’re usually not dangerous. The good ones keep the bad ones in check.”

“Good and bad werewolves?” Lauren repeated. “Like… Noctis and Hellraiser?”

“Oh no.” Ophelia said quickly. “No, there are no Werewolves in the Hellraisers…” She paused, as if she felt she had said too much, and smiled. “Some werewolves don’t align themselves with the Noctis or the Hellraisers.” She said. “And of those, there are a number of them that will gladly attack humans if given the chance.”

Lauren found this interesting. “And the others?”

“Others embrace their humanity, and fight to protect humans.” She said. “From their own kind, especially. They’re very efficient at that… far more than vampires, I would say. Or even witches.”

She sounded a little bit embarrassed about that last tidbit. Lauren found herself biting back her own curiosity to ask her more. About herself, about what it was like to be a Witch, about the Noctis. But at the risk of sounding insensitive, Lauren felt that she had to be very delicate with her questions.

“There are Vampires on Campus?”

“Oh yes.” Ophelia said, nodding at a nearby building. Lauren turned to look, and caught sight of an elaborate sign. Bright red letters spelled out the words VAMPIRE’S KISS, and the little logo depicted a girl biting down on the neck of a rather excited looking young man.

“Men can go in and get paid to be bitten.” Ophelia explained, noticing Lauren’s confused expression. “There are a lot of vampires on campus, and a lot of them are too busy to hunt.”

Lauren touched her own neck self consciously, wondering what it would feel like to have teeth sink into her skin.

“What does a Vampire need to go to college for?” She asked.

“Well, anything they want.” Ophelia said. “History, literature, linguistics, hematology…. Grey Arcadia is a world leader in Vampire studies. This University is where they defined the stages of vampirism, did you know that?”

Lauren did not. She wasn’t even sure what the stages of Vampirism were. She wanted to ask, but there were so many other questions bursting within her throat that she could not decide where she wanted the conversation to go next.

They walked a long while, Ophelia pointing out local businesses and key campus buildings as they went. Lauren was quick to notice that they seemed to stick within Noctis territory.

It was not until they reached the edge of a large body of water that they came to a stop. They leaned out over the railing and stared out over the water. It seemed to be a bay, but there were no boats on the water. There was, however, a small island in the distance with a beautiful mermaid statue facing them.

“Look.” Ophelia said, pointing. Lauren turned to look, and she gasped as a long, beautiful tail splashed across the water.

“Never swim here.” Ophelia advised her. “Merpeople are pretty territorial. And if you bring a date to the beach they’ll come up and try and hassle you.”

“What’s that statue?”

“A Little Mermaid statue. It’s kind of a warning to the public to stay away from the area.”

“Are Merpeople dangerous?”

“In the water, very much so. But they’re out of their element on land.”

Lauren shook her head in wonder. “It’s all so much to remember…”

Ophelia smiled at her cheekily as she leaned over the side of the railing. “You’ll do fine. You’re already doing so well.”

“Am I?” Lauren asked quietly. She was watching the mermaid statue carefully. She had not noticed before, but there was a beautiful orange haired mermaid sitting at the base of the statue, kicking at the water with her fins, seemingly enjoying her morning. “I can’t even get a job.”

Ophelia frowned at her. “The day isn’t over yet. You have plenty of time.”

Lauren could not bring herself to meet her eyes. She watched as the orange haired girl suddenly recoiled as a hand from the water reached up and grabbed her fin. She seemed to cry out as she slid into the water. A moment later she resurfaced, looking rather angry, this time accompanied by a blue haired girl who seemed to be laughing at her.

“Is there really a place here for me?” Lauren asked quietly. “Am I doing the right thing?”

She flinched as Ophelia reached forward and touched her hand. “Of course.” Ophelia said. “You want to be here, don’t you?”

Lauren kept staring out under the water. The mermaids had both dived back underwater, and vanished from sight. She had no idea what they could be doing now. She turned to face Ophelia, who was once again smiling radiantly at her.

“I do.” Lauren said quietly. She looked down at their intwined hands and felt a strong sense of embarrassment. “I want… I want to do well here. But I’m human, and you-“

“Plenty of humans do well at Grey Arcadia.” Ophelia said. “You don’t even know what human girls can accomplish here, with the proper education. Until just yesterday you didn’t know what this school was. Give it time. Get started in your education, and then decide what you want. You have years to figure that out.”

Lauren let out a small laugh. “You make it sound so easy.”

‘It is.” Ophelia told her. “I believe in you.”

She released her hand. Lauren somehow felt both relieved, and a little sad. She doubted that Ophelia understood just how pathetic Lauren truly was.

“How about we go the library.” Ophelia suggested. “And look up successful former human alumni? You might get an idea of what you want to study then.”

Lauren agreed immediately, and the two set off back into town.

“We have a couple of different libraries on campus.” Ophelia explained to her. “The Amaris Yew Noctis Library, and the public one. The public one is a dump, since Hellraisers keep coming in there and ruining it… I always tell people to go to the Noctis one, if they can.”

“Is the Noctis one a private library?”

“Well, not in the traditional sense.” Ophelia said. “We simply don’t allow ours to be destroyed the way the public one is.” She pointed upward. “See those statues?”

Standing high above them were giant, winged statues that stared down at them. Beasts of all shapes and sizes stared down at them. Lauren felt as if she were being watched by living things.

“Gargoyles.” Ophelia explained, as they came to a stop outside the library. Two lion statues, a male and a female, sat on either side, staring out into the street. She reached out a hand and gave the female a pat. “They come to life and protect the library whenever it’s in danger.”

Lauren stepped forward and observed the statue closely. It looked like an ordinary statue to her.

“How do you tell a gargoyle from an ordinary statue?” She asked.

“You really can’t.” Ophelia told her. “Gargoyles come in all kinds of shapes and sizes… and people just love making ordinary statues based on them. I’m told that even they can’t tell the difference these days.”

The Lioness snorted. Lauren jumped back in surprise but Ophelia laughed. She gave the gargoyle another pat and stepped up the stairs.

"Coming?"

Lauren obediently followed Ophelia up the stairs. Ophelia flicked her hands carelessly, and the giant double doors slid open, revealing a giant, open space.

She stepped inside, and Lauren was quick to saunter in after her. She looked around the room in wonder. Although it was in the middle of the day, the ceiling seemed to be covered in brightly lit stars that swirled around each other in a vortex, casting the rest of the room in an otherworldly light.

"It's enchanted." Ophelia explained, in a quiet tone. "The Noctis associate themselves with night and the darkness, so a lot of our buildings look like this.

"It's so cool." Lauren whispered, staring up at the stars with interest. "Is this the actual night sky?"

"Of course!" Ophelia said immediately. "See, you can make out the constellations… what's your birthday?"

"My birthday?" Lauren repeated. "Um. May 30th."

"So you're a Gemini." Ophelia murmured. The instant she spoke lines began to appear in the night sky above them, and the unmistakable shape of the Gemini constellation appeared above them.

"Wow!" Lauren whispered, as she stared up at it in wonder. She had never been interested in Astrology, or even really known her sign, but seeing the stars above her gave her a strange, otherworldly feeling. It somehow gave her a sense of belonging. It somehow made her feel special.

"A really cool effect, isn't it?" Ophelia said, beaming, as the lines disappear. "It's a pretty cool way to learn about the universe."

"I'd say." Lauren said. She wanted to stay and name every constellation she could think of, but Ophelia had already taken her

hand and was dragging her away.

"We keep our fiction and literature on the second floor." She explained. "And the nonfiction and records on the first."

Lauren wanted to see the second floor, but Ophelia walked her right past the stairs and into a hallway. She tried to hide her disappointment as they walked past door after door and came to stop outside a door labeled 'GREY ARCADIA.'

"They like putting everything related to the University in a single section." Ophelia told her. "For situation like yours, I suppose." She waved her hand, the door opened.

Rows upon rows of books were spread out before them. Lauren felt her mouth fall open.

"Well?" Ophelia asked. "Where should we start?"

Lauren stared at her for a moment. She let go of Ophelia's hand and stepped into the room. Her eyes ran over the rows and rows of books, and she could not quite decide where she wanted to start. She picked one at random, and checked the cover.

"Architecture of Grey Arcadia…?"

"Probably a history of the buildings on campus." Ophelia said. "A lot of it has been around for centuries, and a lot of them are influenced by classical European…"

Lauren put the book back and walked along the bookshelf. She picked up another book.

"Grey Arcadia: A History?"

"A great read." Ophelia said, beaming. "I highly recommend it. It's… uh, a little long though."

Ophelia checked the page count. It was over a thousand pages, and all of the print was tiny.

"You should check it out when you get your library card." Ophelia told her. "How about we make a list?"

She procured a pen and paper from her bag and wrote "Grey Arcadia: A History." With a flourish. Rather than setting the pen and paper aside, they floated alongside them in mid-air, awaiting further use.

"That book is more about the general history of the university than it's academics, though." Ophelia said. "Ah."

She reached out, and pulled down another book off of the shelf. She held it out to Lauren, who took it.

"The Great Graduates of Grey Arcadia…"

"I've never read it." Ophelia admitted. "But I think it might be a good place to start."

It did seem to be a much lighter read, so Lauren took the book and the two of them found two nice armchairs in a corner and sat down to pour over their find.

"I've been reading a lot of Lucille Langley lately." Ophelia said. "I wonder…" She flipped through the pages and smiled to herself. "Here she is."

Lauren bent her head over the book to get a better look at the passage. A picture of a surprisingly beautiful young woman stared up at her sternly through a pair of glasses.

"Lucille Langley." Lauren read. "Born 1962. Lucille was already a Knight of the Order of the Dragon by the time she became a student at Grey Arcadia. Although perhaps best known for her military accomplishments, many of her academic pursuits, such as her research into the study of dragons, have their roots during her days at Grey Arcadia."

She looked up at Ophelia. She had the impression that Ophelia found this much more interesting than she did.

"She's so cool." Ophelia said. "I would love to meet her…"

Lauren kept reading.

"Lucille is married to noted historian Phil Langley, and they have three children."

Lauren looked up at Ophelia. “She studies dragons?”

“Oh yes.” Ophelia said. “She and her husband are the leading authorities in their field. Their books are well worth checking out… well, if you’re interested, that is.” She sounded a little embarrassed. Lauren thought it was best to move on to the next biography.

“Mortamor Nyx.” Lauren read. At this name Ophelia smirked. “Born 1972. came to Grey Arcadia at eighteen years old. Following an extensive internship studying the Great Old Ones and their active cults all over the world, she made a name for herself translating the Necronomicon into human languages and annotating it in great detail, making its text much more decipherable to modern scholars.”

“She’s a Knight too.” Ophelia said, somewhat less enthusiastically. “Well, she married one, at any rate.”

Lauren glanced over the text. It went into some talk about her family, particularly her husband the Knight of Nightmares, and the fact that they had one daughter together.

“It says her husband fought a-“

“They’re the Order of the Dragon, they fight everything.” Ophelia said. “Um, how about you find someone that isn’t associated with them?”

She flipped through the book.

“Dr. Victor Prometheus?”

“Oooooh, the constructionist.” Ophelia said, with much more enthusiasm. “He was famous for mixing modern medical science with magic to create life.”

Lauren’s eyes flittered over the biography of the rather stern looking man staring up at her.

“It says here that he was a Hellraiser.” She said slowly.

“Well… yes.” Ophelia said, a little taken aback. “Really?” She leaned in and looked at it, frowning.. “I guess he was.” Ophelia said, a little surprised.

“You didn’t know?”

“Well, I know that he tried to make an Eve.” Ophelia said, frowning. “Which I think would go against that philosophy…?”

Upon noticing Lauren’s baffled look, she elaborated. “Oh, a constructionist is what we call people who try and make artificial human life.” She explained. “We call attempts at making human females Eves…. Males are Adams.”

“But what does that have to do with him being a Hellraiser?”

“Well, Hellraisers hate humans.” Ophelia explained. “So making them seems kind of…. Uh, weird to me. It seems kind of… counterproductive?” She shook her head. “I should read up on that. Do you mind if I leave you for a bit?”

“Not at all.” Lauren said, surprised. “Um. You are coming back, right?”

Ophelia laughed, winked at her, and then stepped to grab her own book. Lauren looked down at her own book. She was surprised to find that she was smiling.

Her smile faded a little as she tried to focus on page after page. She read about famous alchemists, sorcerers, Vampire Hunters, several more Knights of the Order of the Dragon, and Mermaids.

She had just finished reading about how the Mermaid Michelle Trison had gone on to become an architect for undersea churches and had worked tirelessly to bring Christianity to Merpeople when Ophelia returned, holding a large book titled ‘The Life of Dr. Victor Prometheus.”

“Find anything interesting?” She asked, as she sat back down.

“Well… yes.” Lauren said. “I was just reading about Michelle Trison…” She had just been looking at the photograph of one of her buildings, and had thought it one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen in her life.

“Oh, she still teaches here.” Ophelia said brightly. Her eyes brightened as Lauren’s finger pointed out the photo. “Oooooh, the

Atlantic Cathedral.” She said. “Most Merpeople worship the Great Old Ones or the Olympians, so it was kind of a big deal when it was built. See those fish swimming around? They’re actually trained guards that protect it near constantly.”

“I wish I could see it in person.” Lauren said sadly.

“Oh, you can!” Ophelia said, surprised. “It’s enchanted… humans can survive in there no problem. Some of the super religious students take trips down there sometimes…”

“Do you?”

Ophelia gave her a surprised look. Lauren had the impression that she had asked a rather naïve question.

“I’m a witch.” Ophelia told her, her voice slow and deliberate. “I don’t go to Church.”

Lauren had the nasty feeling she had just offended her. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” She said quickly. “I didn’t mean to offend-“

“No, no.” Ophelia said quickly. “No, I understand that you must be a little confused.” She sounded a little upset. “I mean, I just praised the Church right…? Of course you would assume I’m a believer.” Despite her words Lauren felt a mounting sense of shame inside of her.

“Do Witches...” Lauren struggled to find the words. “Well, do you all…”

“Witches.” Ophelia said. “Are tied intrinsically to the master they serve, body and soul. The idea of being subservient to any other being, man, being, or God… is often intolerable to us.”

“And your Master… is the Noctis?”

“My Master is aligned with the Noctis.” Ophelia said. “And as a result, I am as well.”

Lauren tilted her head. “Is that why Witches are torn between Helllraisers and the Noctis?” She asked. “They’re serving masters that serve different sides?”

Ophelia gave her a surprised look. “You catch on quickly.” She said, sounding impressed. “Yes, that is exactly correct. Our allegiance depends entirely on what the Master desires.” She leaned in closer to Ophelia.

“Do you have any idea what you want to study yet?”

She clearly wanted to change the subject. Lauren cast her eyes down at the book.

“I… it all sounds so scary.” She said. “Vampire hunting? Studying Great Old Ones? Knighthood? I can never do any of that…”

“I agree.” Ophelia said. “You need something a little bit more laid back… something a little bit casual. Maybe you could learn to speak Mermish? There are merchants who will try and sell human stuff to Merpeople…”

“I’m not really interested in learning another language.” Lauren said anxiously.

“Hm.” Ophelia said. “Well, the American government is trying to expand its military to deal with supernatural threats… you could probably study for a desk job of some kind.”

“I don’t want to join the military!” She repeated, horrified.

“Oh, you wouldn’t be helping with military tactics or anything like that.” Ophelia clarified. “Actually what they want more than anything right now is intelligence… the United States has the best human military in the world, but when it comes to supernatural stuff…. They are far, far behind Europe and Asia. They were behind Russia too, until the Soviet Union collapsed. What they need is intelligence. Grey Arcadia is becoming their go to place to recruit people for that.”

“Hmmm…”

“If you’re not sure.” Ophelia said. “Give it time and think about it, okay? It may be a more attractive idea for you when you’re ready.”

Lauren nodded. “I think I will consider that.” She said softly.

“Excellent.” Ophelia said happily. “I’m sure you could do great.”

“What else could I do, do you think?”

“Hmmm.” Ophelia said. “I’m not sure… a lot of these people in this book are Knights or not human. Are there any ordinary people in there?”

“What do you mean by ordinary?” Lauren asked, as she raised the book upward.

“Like… someone you can relate to. Someone you can look up to.” She explained. “Like… someone human.” She looked a little bit embarrassed. “I’m not sure how much I can be at that… I don’t often pay attention to ordinary humans.”

“Don’t say that.” Lauren said quickly. “You’ve been a great help.” She closed the book and stood up. “Do you know anyone who would?”

“Well…” She looked a little hesitant. “Over Summer Vacation…? I don’t think so. Most people don’t like staying here… unless their family owns a local business or something.”

“Why are you still here?”

Ophelia smiled winningly. “The Master’s orders.”

They stood and walked to the door.

“I’d say and try and form connections with other human students as quickly as possible.” Ophelia said.

“And what do I do until then?”

“Well, this is the safest time of year for sure.” She said. “So I think once you find an apartment… and a job…”

Lauren felt herself seize up. She had almost forgotten.

“Again, there is no real rush though.” Ophelia went on. “You may stay with me until my roommates return.”

This did not reassure her at all. “And… and when will that be?”

“The first day of the semester.” Ophelia confirmed. “But I must warn you… you cannot stay once they arrive. They are not as fond of humans as I.”

Lauren felt herself seize up.

"But I think you'll be fine." Ophelia told her. "You just need… to find your footing. That's all."

They stepped out of the room and to the check out desk. Lauren handed the book over to Ophelia, who procured her library card.

The woman at the check out desk resembled a large spider. Four large, black orbs that seemed to be her eyes ran around her head, from the front to the side. One set of arms was typing furiously at an old typewriter, while the other was holding aloft an open book. Lauren was sure that if she peered under the desk, she would see two sets of legs as well.

"Ah, Ophelia." The woman said. Her voice made an odd clicking noise in between each syllable. "Back so soon?"

"I'm showing my friend around today." Ophelia said brightly.

The book closed slowly and the dark eyes met Lauren's. She found herself instinctively pulling away. Before she could, however, Ophelia wrapped her arm around hers, keeping her in place.

"Lauren, this is Spinnet Orchid." Ophelia said. Her voice still seemed light and friendly, but Lauren felt that something was wrong. "She's a librarian here."

"Oh, nice to meet you, Spinnet." Lauren said quickly, bowing her head. She felt Ophelia's arm around hers tighten. The black eyes of the spider were staring at her.

"A human, are you?" The spider asked. She sounded unimpressed. "Ophelia… what are you playing at?"

Lauren felt her heart stop in her chest. She knew that tone. She could feel the contempt.

"My apologies." Ophelia said. "Please forgive her. She's attending the university this fall, and-"

The witch waved her arm. It was rather long and spindly. Ophelia wordlessly stepped forward and placed the books on the desk.

The woman checked them out, handed Ophelia her card, thanked them, and returned to her book. They stepped away. Lauren could feel her heart racing in her chest.

"Are you alright?" Ophelia asked gently, nudging her.

"Y-yes…" Lauren said, almost gasping. "I was… so scared…"

"I'm so sorry…" Ophelia murmured. "I really should have warned you… it's not really something I think about, but some witches don't exactly look human. They can be quite frightening to humans, I know…"

She seemed to be just as torn up as Lauren was. She did not let go of her arm as they walked out into the street.

"She was a witch?" Lauren asked, as the bright light of the sun fell down on them. Ophelia nodded.

"That's right."

"But… aren't you also a witch…?"

Ophelia looked surprised for a second. "Witches aren't all the same, Lauren."

"Oh… I'm sorry."

Ophelia shook her head. "No, I'm the one who should be sorry." She said. "I should have explained all this to you… It's my fault. I'm your guide for the day, and I-"

She fell silent, shaking her head, and the two of them turned onto a new street.

"Do you want to maybe apply for some other jobs today?" Ophelia asked her. She seemed eager to change the subject.

"Well…" Lauren hesitated. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Of course!" Ophelia said immediately. "You probably wouldn't be able to find your way back, anyway."

Lauren smiled at her gratefully.

“How about a pet store?” Ophelia suggested, as they came to a stop outside a building built of black bricks. The little sign hanging over the door read ‘Creatures of the night.’ With a little blurb on the bottom that read ‘What sweet music they make.’

They peered inside the glass, and Lauren caught sight of a giant bat hanging upside down from a perch. It seemed to be asleep, at first, until a single red eye cracked upon to stare at them. Lauren shuddered.

“No thanks.”

“Good call.” Ophelia agreed. “It’s a vampire place… bats are a popular pet for them.”

They passed by the store, and Lauren caught sight of a lonely looking wolf pup pressed up against the glass.

“There are lots of vampires here then?” Lauren asked, recalling the blood bank they had seen. Ophelia nodded.

“Oh yes.” She said. “This town… not just the campus, but the entire community… is one of the biggest vampire havens in the United States. It always has been. That’s why we have so many European inspired buildings, actually… they tend to like that kind of architecture.”

“Are they… dangerous?” Lauren asked, a little bit timidly.

“Hm.” Ophelia said. “That’s kind of a difficult question. They are. But they choose not to be. They’re really no different than myself in that regard. Ah.”

She raised her hand, and Lauren looked where she was pointing. A large, burly man was cutting the limbs off of a tree.

“The University hires a bunch of people to maintain the campus.” Ophelia explained. “Garderners and groundskeepers and… uh, people like that.”

“Are they vampires too?”

“Actually, I think that guy is a werewolf.” Ophelia noted. Upon noting the look on Lauren’s face, she elaborated. “They really like the

outdoorsy stuff, and they're super tight with one another. And they see themselves as human, too. It might be a good fit for you…?"

Lauren shook her head. "I don't know a thing about working outdoors…" She murmured. "I have no experience with gardening, or tools…"

"Hm." Ophelia said. "Well, like I said, there are lots of positions at the University. I'm sure you can find something that suits you."

Lauren nodded, biting her lip. She stared at the concrete and watched their feet as they walked along the pavement. She couldn't bring herself to admit it to Ophelia, but she didn't think she would be able to work any kind of job at all.

Even if she were by some miracle given one… she would fail. Just like she failed all of her classes, failed at being a normal child, failed at living a normal life. It would be nothing more than yet another failure in a long string of failures.

And then she heard it.

She raised her head and stared. Ophelia, who seemed to have not noticed anything, had kept walking. As they were still arm in arm, they awkwardly stumbled.

"Hey-" Ophelia said. "Lauren? What's wrong?"

It was the most beautiful music she had ever heard. Ophelia frowned at her and tugged at her arm.

"Lauren." She said warningly. "Be careful."

Despite her warning, however, the two of them stepped forward to the large wooden door in front of them. Lauren barely registered what she was doing as she pushed open the door. She could feel Ophelia tighten her arm around her, as if she was trying to get a better grip on her, but paid her no mind.

They found themselves in a large, open hall. Rows upon rows of seats sat facing a raised altar. Behind this altar was one of the most elaborate murals she had ever seen in her life. Beautiful winged creatures with golden instruments soared high above the Earth,

where shadowy creatures snipped and bit at each other trying to reach them.

But it was the grand organ that caught her attention the most. It was a majestic thing, so grand that it blocked out most of the mural behind it. The man playing this organ had his back to them. His fingers deftly moved over the keys at an incredible speed, but each note came was precise, and beautiful.

Ophelia tightened her grip on her.

“I won’t stop you.” Ophelia whispered. “But be careful.”

She let go of her arm. Lauren stood there, staring. The shock of Ophelia letting go of her overwhelming her senses. But when she got over the immediate shock, and the music overtook her senses again, she gladly stepped forward.

She walked forward up the aisle and came to a stop right in front of the organist. She watched him intently, as his fingers moved along the keys. Each note, she felt, was more beautiful than the last.

And then a voice entered her mind.

“Welcome.” It said. “To my Castle.”

She gave a start. There was no doubt where the voice had come from. The man in black playing in front of her.

“Come.” The voice said. And Lauren did. She stepped up the tiny, ornate steps and came to a stop right before the organist. At this distance the sound was deafening.

“Do you know the name of this piece?”

She wasn’t quite sure how. She had never truly studied music. But somehow she knew the answer.

“It’s Moonlight Sonata.” She said immediately, unaware that no one could possibly hear her over the sound of the organ. “Beethoven.”

“That is correct.” The voice whispered. “You are a woman of refined taste.”

Lauren bent her head. She could feel herself turning red. And for some reason she could feel herself start to cry. The music was simply so beautiful.

"You." The voice said. "Are unlike all others."

Lauren felt her breath hitch in her throat. It was not the personal insults and disrespect she was used to. This man… he was complimenting her.

"This place." He said. "Is in need of a caretaker. I cannot leave my organ, or my art. May I entrust this task to you…?"

Lauren stared at the back of his head. The music swirled around her and felt as if it enveloping her completely.

"What must I do…?"

"You will live here, and ensure that everyone who comes to enjoy my music has the ideal experience." It said. "That is all."

"Live… here?" She repeated. "Are you… sure?"

"It must be you."

It was no different than the invitation to Grey Arcadia. A completely new opportunity had been offered to her, completely out of the blue. She now had a place to live and work, and if she was paid as well…

"Yes!" She blurted out. "I would love that… Sir!"

The song ended.

"Thank you."

And another one began.

Lauren smiled widely, before coming to a startling realization. She had left Ophelia at the door. She turned around, eager to tell her the good news.

She was no longer there. Lauren stared. She could feel her heart breaking in her chest. She quickly stepped down the stairs to look around. She hoped that Ophelia would be waiting for her outside. She opened the door.

She was not there. Lauren stood there in the doorway, staring out into the street. Her heart fell a little tight in her chest.

She looked down and saw that the pile of books they had checked out were lying at her feet. She bent down and picked them up, wrapping her fingers around them gingerly. Stuck to the top of them was a little post it note.

She pulled the note off and held it up to her face. In beautiful handwriting was a message.

Lauren,

It seems like you've found what you were looking for. I'm happy for you. I'll be sure to send your things over tonight, okay? But do me a favor… and please remember to return the library books I checked out for you.

-With Love

Ophelia

Lauren found himself smiling as she stared down at the letter in her hands. Little teardrops fell from her eyelids onto it. She wiped her eyes and stood up straight. She gave one last look at the street around her before turning back into her new home.

The door closed behind her.

"Sir." She said. "I am ready to begin."

Chapter 3

It was very much unlike any job she had ever heard of before. Her parents had spent her entire childhood drilling into her the horrors of the modern workplace. How bosses and managers expected you to sacrifice your personal life for the company. How working eight hours a day, five days a week was draining and exhausting. How most jobs were completely brain dead and relatively pointless, and only existed to make other people richer. One of her father's favorite sayings was 'A life spent working is a life wasted.' He was proud to have never worked a day in his life, and actively encouraged his wife and daughter to do the same.

Why then, was she so happy at her new job?

Once she had settled into her little room, on the other side of the building away from the Music Hall, she had gone to the Master and asked what he needed her to do first. He was surprisingly very vague.

"I want music to be heard."

And he had not elaborated further. She had done whatever she could think of. Cleaning the music hall, ensuring the chairs were aligned properly, washing the windows. All the while he had sat there, playing elaborate pieces on the Organ.

She had worried that she was not doing a good enough job, and that she would be fired and kicked out. But as the weeks and months went by, and she settled into a routine, she began to realize that that was simply not going to happen. The Master seemed perfectly content with her performance. He never rose from his seat on the organ, and never spoke to her. And yet Lauren felt that he was very fond of her, and she could not understand why.

She never saw him rise from the organ. He sat playing there, seemingly all the time. From early in the morning until late at night. Sometimes someone from off the street would come in and listen, usually for about half an hour or so, and then go about their day elsewhere. They were not charged. Lauren honestly could not see where the money for her checks were coming from. She had found herself a little surprised when she saw the first one lying on her dresser.

She had a place to live, and money to spend. She spent the months leading up to the semester preparing. Typically she would wake up at six, work until ten, go shopping for four hours or so, and then return and work until bed. It was a strange schedule, to be sure, but it was what she wanted to do and the Master had no objection to it.

It was liberating… far more liberating than she had thought. She had always thought she would hate working, and yet… it was working out for her.

Yet there were reasons for that. She would never be able to work for, or even really interact, with a normal person. Yet the Master was anything but normal. In a way she felt as if he was like her.

"Master." She said. "Is there anything you need?"

"No."

She hesitated. It was such a blunt answer that she feared that he was angry with her. But he had never spoken to her more than he had that first day. He wanted to be alone with his music. And she, in a way, deeply appreciated that. She had complete control of when and how her tasks got done. She didn't need a boss or supervisor looking over her shoulder, screaming at her about how she didn't do something or other. No, she just needed a job in between classes.

But now a new problem was surfacing. The Master spoke to her so little that she had no idea whether or not she was doing what he wanted. If she got fired now, before she had built up her savings, she would be right back on the street. And she doubted strongly that Ophelia would take her back in.

Her heart fell in her chest. Ophelia. Although she had kept her word and sent along Lauren's meager belongings, just as her note said she would, she had made no effort to reconnect with her. It seemed that once Lauren had found her footing on Campus, Ophelia felt that she no longer needed her assistance. In other words, she had fallen out of her life just as quickly as she had fallen in.

Lauren felt conflicted. On one hand, Ophelia had done way too much for her to begin with. She had fed her, allowed her to stay with her, and even helped try to find her a job. But on the other… Lauren had felt that they had struck up a true, genuine friendship. She felt a little hurt that she had been discarded so quickly. Ophelia had been so nice to her, she had already begun to think that they would spend the remainder of their lives at Grey Arcadia in each other's company… and hopefully remain friends long afterward.

She struggled with these feelings for weeks as she went about her business. She signed up for her classes, bought her school books,

and took frequent lonely walks around campus. She kept hoping that she would run into Ophelia, and that they could talk, but she never saw her. She almost seriously tried seeking out her house, but found herself unwilling to even try. The idea of going back there, uninvited, made her uneasy. The last thing she wanted to do was make Ophelia unhappy with her.

These thoughts enveloped her almost completely, at first, but soon enough she began to feel a new sense of dread. Her oncoming semester at Grey Arcadia.

She had elected to take only four classes this semester. Historia, Occult Literature, Introduction to Political Evils, and Magic Studies 101. She had decided very early on that she was simply too unstable to take on anything more than four courses. She felt that it would take her longer, far longer, than four years to figure out what she wanted to do with her life, and felt that it would be far more beneficial to her to take it slow and easy to start with.

Her course selection had primarily been influenced by her interactions with Ophelia. She had been so enthusiastic about history and politics that a lot of it had rubbed off on Lauren. She had decided that it would be a good place to start. Once she had gotten her books, she spent a lot of her free time shut up on her room, reading up on everything she would need to know.

Despite her efforts, however, she felt a strong sense of unease as orientation day approached. For the first time she would be interacting with other students at Grey Arcadia. Lauren, following her disastrous job search, had kept mostly to herself these past few weeks. But soon she would have to put herself around other people.

The day before orientation was nightmarish. She felt herself become increasingly nervous as she went about her daily tasks. Her hands shook as she scrubbed the floor to the hall, and she found herself jumping every time a guest stepped through those giant wooden doors. She wasn’t looking forward to being around other people again at all.

She went to bed early that night and sat up, staring at the ceiling. Her heart was racing in her chest. She felt unbearably anxious. Tomorrow… tomorrow was going to be a nightmare. She closed her eyes and tried to think of a way to calm herself down.

"Camilla." She whispered. "Are you awake?"

(Yes, darling.)

She felt herself relax somewhat. "Good." She murmured again. "I'm scared."

(There's nothing to be scared of)

Lauren laughed. "For you, maybe. But I'm scared stiff."

(Don't be)

"I'm not sure I can handle it." Lauren murmured. "I don't want to be around other people."

(People are fun)

"But I'm not." Lauren said. She had to stop herself from sitting up and wiping away the tears in her eyes. "I'm not a normal person. I'm nothing like them!"

(This is Grey Arcadia. Many strange people go to school here.)

"No one like me." Lauren said grimly.

(Are you so sure?)

"Yes." Lauren said, bluntly. "No one will accept me."

There was a very awkward silence. Lauren had no idea where her imaginary conversation would go next. She was just beginning to feel that she had somehow driven away her own imaginary friend when a response came to her.

(So what if they don't accept you? Are you not exactly where you want to be?)

Lauren thought about it for a while.

"I am." She said at last. "I… I'm glad to have gotten away from my parents."

(Cherish that feeling. As long as you know that you are exactly where you need to be, you have nothing to fear)

Lauren somehow felt a little bit better. “Thanks, Camilla.” She murmured, her eyes drooping. “You’re… a good friend.”

…

When she woke up the next day her anxiety had returned full force. She found herself feeling very uneasy as she forced herself out of bed and brushed her teeth. She had set aside what she thought was her best outfit the night before, but looking at it now she worried that it would be too drab for such a momentous event. When she put it in she stared at herself in the mirror.

What a disgusting girl. She thought to herself bitterly, before turning away.

She gathered her bag, already full of books and pens, and made her way to the front door. The Master was sitting at his organ, as usual, and a beautiful melody sprung forth. Lauren almost felt as if she were being sent off to war. She stopped and listened for a while, perhaps longer than she should have, before opening the door and stepping out into the street.

It was busier than it ever had been before. What had once been a somewhat unusual street filled with strange shops and businesses that provided services that she did not understand had seemingly overnight become completely alien to her. Burning torches of black flames lined each side of the street, casting an odd darkness onto every building. Live bats, seemingly very comfortable in this environment, chittered among themselves from their perch on the building. A girl with strange, strandlike hair that seemed to flow as if it were underwater walked by with a chain wrapped around the neck of a vicious looking fish with four human shaped legs protruding from the sides of its body. A wolf that was going the other way hurriedly crossed the street to avoid them.

Lauren felt that familiar sense of nausea of being surrounded by so many people and stepped out into the street. The sooner she got

through orientation, the sooner she would be coming back. She tried to ignore the bats above her stop their chittering and began to watch her as she tried making her way through the busy street.

An old, haggard woman wearing a cloak beckoned her. “Fancy a treat, sweetie?” She asked, as she protruded an apple and held it out to her. “A pretty girl like you-“

Lauren ignored her and walked by. The woman turned away and repeated her query to another girl. Lauren looked back. The woman had backed away in fear as the girl with bright red hair held out a beautiful gleaming sword in front of her. Lauren turned back around as shouts began to erupt behind her. She began to walk a little bit faster.

Things got worse the closer she got to the location. Witches dressed in dark black robes and pointed hats walked in synchronization so closely together that she had to press herself against a wall to avoid them. They seemed to be chanting to themselves under their breath as they passed by.

She was greatly relieved when she finally made it to her destination. A beautiful, church like building that towered over the rest of the streets.

The gargoyles standing on either side of the door turned their heads downward to look at her as she approached. She gulped.

“Name?” They rasped in unison.

“Uhhh… Lauren Frey.” She said, taken aback somewhat. They nodded.

“You are here for orientation?” They said. “Humans will meet in the Hall of Eden. Past these doors you will follow the signs to your destination.”

They stiffened and became still. Lauren stared at them, worried that they would spring back to life and attack.

“Is there a problem?”

Lauren jumped. She turned around to see a short haired girl smiling at her. She was a tall and powerful looking girl, her well defined arms clearly exposed due to her sleeveless top.

The statues came to life again.

"Name?"

"Emilia Fenrir." She said.

"You are here for orientation?" The statues asked. "Werewolves will meet in the Wolf House. Past these doors you will follow the signs to your destination."

"Thanks." The girl said. "I'm looking forward to it."

She turned to Lauren. "Shall we?" She asked.

Lauren nodded, a little sheepishly, as the girl strode forward and opened the door. They found themselves in a large, open atrium. Sunlight fell down on them in warm waves through the glass ceiling. A sinister looking tree stood planted in the middle of the hall.

"So." The girl, Emilia said. "Which way are you going…?"

"Um." Lauren raised a finger and pointed at a sign that pointed to go forward, past the tree.

"Me too." Emily said brightly. "Want to walk together?"

"Um…"

Lauren wasn't thrilled at the idea, but before she could get the words out Emilia stepped down the hall. Lauren, reluctantly, followed her.

The tree planted in the center of the room seemed to have its own little garden, roped off from the rest of the room. Emilia cast a glance at it.

"I hate vampires." She said scornfully, as she turned to the hallway to their right. Lauren checked the sign to make sure that she was going the right way, and followed her.

"So." Emily said. "You're here for orientation too?"

“I… yes.”

“Nervous?”

“A… little…”

Emily laughed. “Yeah, me too.” She said. “My parents didn’t want me to come, but I talked them down in the end.”

“Yeah…?” Lauren found this very interesting. Perhaps she had more in common with this girl than she had thought.

“You human?”

“Wha-?”

“You’re human right?”

“Y-yes…”

“I thought so.” Emily said, matter of factly. “I can tell. You look really out of place compared to most of the freaks here.”

“You… think so?”

“Yeah.” Emily said, laughing a little. “Hang on…”

They come to a stop. The signs were pointed them in different directions.

“Hey, it was nice meeting you.” Emily said. “Take care of yourself, alright?”

She waved and entered her room. Lauren bent her head and proceeded down the hallway.

She had not offered anything of value to that conversation at all. There was so much she wished she could have said to her or asked her about. Emilia had been so nice and yet…

She came to a stop outside a door and looked at the next sign. This was it. This was the Hall of Eden. She stared at the door, a little bit apprehensive, before stepping inside.

She was expecting a large crowd. She was surprised to find that maybe a dozen people sat lounging around the room in armchairs. The room itself was a bright, brilliant green. A vast mural covering

the walls of the room depicted plants and fruits beautifully entwining amongst each other. The one exception was one small stretch of wall, where a large, beautiful tree stood alone in the distance.

“Hello.” A voice came from her left. She turned to look and she found a brown haired girl with glasses standing by the door. It was clear that she had been waiting for her.

“Um, hello.”

“You’re Lauren Frey, right?” The girl asked, smiling, a she held up a name tag. Lauren saw her name clearly written on it. “My name is Alisa Coghland… I’ll be your guide for today. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh… you too.”

Lauren reached out and took the name tag from her and placed it on her chest.

“Have a seat.” Alisa said, waving her to the seats around the hall. Lauren nodded at her and made her way to the emptiest side of the room. There was only one person sitting here, and in a lot of ways he was the strangest person she had seen yet.

He was completely bald, and dressed in what seemed to be some kind of bright orange robe. He had his legs crossed in his chair, and he held his hands outward as if he were in the middle of some kind of prayer. Lauren hoped that he wouldn’t try and speak to her, but just as she sat down her opened his eyes and smiled at her.

“Hello there.” He said softly. “What is your name?”

She felt a strong sense of revulsion well up within her. “Lauren.” She answered. She turned away, hoping to show him that the conversation was over. He seemed to get the gist, and returned to his prayer.

She spent the next fifteen minutes watching those around her. It certainly was an odd bunch, she thought to herself. The kids at her high school had seemed to spend all of their time on their phones or gossiping. The atmosphere in here was radically different. It was cold and somewhat chilling. Everyone seemed to be on edge. More

than one of the people around here were carrying swords or other weapons.

A handful of other people came in after her, younger girls mostly, who quickly were shown in and took their seats.

"I think that's everyone." Alisa said at last, as she checked her clipboard. "Right…. Shall we get started?" She strode to the center of the room and walked towards one of the walls.

"How about we begin by introducing ourselves?" She asked. "Since there are so few of us…"

Lauren did a quick head count. There were about twenty of them in all. This was it? She thought to herself. These were all of the human students coming into Grey Arcadia…?

"Let's start with your names, where you came from, and what you hope to accomplish here." Alisa said. "And then we can begin the orientation proper."

She pointed to a girl on her left. "We'll start with you." She said. "And then go around the room in a circle.

Lauren shirked backward in her chest, her heart beating furiously in her chest. She was sitting on the furthermost spot from the girl in question. She would be going last. She tried to grapple with what she would say. The very thought of speaking in front of all of these people made her nauseous.

The girl stood up. She was a tall, blonde girl with a fair face and features.

"Hello." She said. "I'm Alriya Prince. My father is a centurion in the Sentinels of Americana, and recommended I go to school here."

"Is he?" Alisa asked, sounding a little surprised. "Which legion?"

"Rabbit Run."

Alisa let out a hiss of breath, and then smiled. "So he fought the New Red Army." She said. Alriya nodded, looking surprised. "It's always good to see the children of veterans here… are you hoping to follow in his footsteps?"

“I haven’t decided.” Alriya said.

“If you’re not sure a military career is for you, I would personally advise against it.” Alisa said. “Becoming a Sentinel of Americana is certainly not for everyone. Regardless, I thank your father for his service.”

Alriya sat back down. Lauren could not decide whether she was happy or upset. To her it looked like a little bit of both.

“And you?”

The second student stood up. It was girl. This girl was not quite as tall as the first, but her long brown hair fell down her back down to her waist.

“Greetings.” She said, bowing. She spoke with a rather posh English accent. “I am Charlotte Harker.”

“Harker?” Alisa repeated, staring at the girl in interest. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you-“

“Am a descendent of Jonathan and Wilhelmina Harker, yes.” She said. “A pleasure to meet you all.”

Brief murmurs filled the hall, particularly from those who were carrying weapons. Lauren herself had no idea what to make of this revelation, although it clearly meant something to those around her.

“It’s definitely an honor to meet you.” Alisa said. “I must say that I’m surprised you came here, of all places.”

Charlotte smiled.

“This University is home to many brilliant minds.” She said. “It would be a waste to let this opportunity slip me by just because of my family history.”

“Yes… I understand completely.” Alisa said, although Lauren thought she heard a twinge of doubt in her voice. “Well… moving on?”

But she hadn’t answered the question. Lauren thought to herself frantically, as Charlotte Harker sat back down. The next student, a boy, stood up.

He was an oddly dressed sort. His pants were loose and baggy, and the headband drawn over his eyes seemed so tight that there was no way he could see out of them.

"Hey." He said. His tone was off somehow, as if he was not used to speaking in this way. "My name is Paz. I'm… uh, from Spain. I'm here to develop my psychic powers."

"Oh, you're a psychic?" Alisa said. "A real one?"

"Yeah."

"How did your powers manifest, if you don't mind me asking?"

His lips curled in a small smile. "I was born a blind deaf. I learned to talk by reading people's minds."

"Yes, I've heard of that happening." Alisa said. "Psychic powers are brought on by the mind being unable to handle trauma, after all… Usually involving the loss of one of the five senses. I take it you're here to hone your powers?"

"Yes."

"Well, you have developed real powers, so that probably makes you more qualified than a lot of the instructors here." She said. "It's a very rare phenomenon… I'm no expert, but I believe the university is working to figure out how all that works. You may be fighting an uphill battle…"

"I know that very well, but I think I'm in the right place."

"Well then welcome aboard." Alisa said. "I hope you find your way… please let me know if you need help getting your books in braille, I'll be more than happy to help." Her eyes moved over to the fourth. "You."

The girl in the bright pink dress stood up.

"Hello everyone!" She said, as if addressing the entire room. "My name is Apricot… Princess Apricot! It's a real pleasure to meet all of you!"

She smiled winningly. The crowd stared.

“Princess?” Alisa repeated, as she scanned her clipboard. “Princess of what?” She sounded confused.

Princess Apricot held out a finger, and a bright pink energy welled up within it. Alisa’s eyes widened, but before she could move a little pink heart formed from the tip of her finger and then floated upward, towards the ceiling.

“And… where are you from?” Alisa asked, hesitating a little.

“Hm.” Apricot said, tilting her head to the side. “I’m not sure. I’ve never been asked that before…”

“And what do you hope to accomplish here?”

Her confused expression melted. “I want a boyfriend!”

Alisa seemed at a complete loss for words. There was a very awkward silence.

“Next.” Alisa said at last. Apricot smiled widely, gave one last large wave to the crowd, and sat back down. A boy stood up.

“Well someone will be willing to date you…. someday.” He said casually. There were awkward chuckles, including from Princess Apricot herself who did not seem to realize that she had just been insulted.

“I’m Ordell Walker.” He said. “I’m from England… but I’ve been living in the States for a decade.”

“Really?” Alisa asked. “Your accent…”

“Yeah, I got sick of people pointing it out.” He said. He put on a high pitched, thick accent. “Hey are you Australian? It got really annoying.”

“What are you going to school for?”

He raised his thumb to his face. “I’m going to be a Spirit Detective.”

Charlotte Harker shot him an interested look. He caught her eye and smiled. They lingered a little bit, until Alisa spoke again.

“A spirit detective.” Alisa repeated. “Well you’re in the right place for that. We have ghosts everywhere. You’ll get plenty of experience

dealing with them. And of course our professors are experts in that field… although I must warn you that a good number of them consider themselves exorcists."

Lauren had no idea what this was supposed to mean at all.

"Glad to hear it."

Ordell Walker sat down. The boy sitting next to him stood up. The boy sitting next to him stood up. This was one of the ones carrying weapons. In this case, three separate swords hung at his side.

"Zane." He said. "I have no country."

"Zane." Alisa said, exasperated. "You're from Italy."

"The Order of the Dragon has no nation."

"You're from Italy." She repeated, exasperated. "What do you hope to learn here, Zane?" She spoke as if she already knew the answer.

"I am here to fulfill my duty as a knight of the Order of the Dragon." He said. "To study the enemy."

"Yes, yes, that's very good." Alisa said, a little bit hastily, as he sat back down. "Of course you will be going to class… right?"

Zane did not answer. The seventh student began to stand up. Lauren felt herself grow increasingly nervous. Twelve more…. And then she would be expected to speak.

"I am Simeon Walton." The boy said. He was dressed in an immaculate black suit and gloves. He looked much older than a college freshman. "I am going to be an architect."

"An architect, huh…" Alisa said. "Why come to Grey Arcadia?"

"I greatly admire the buildings here." He said. "They are among the most beautiful in the United States. Not that that's saying much."

"That is true." Alisa acknowledged. "So you want to study our buildings?"

"Yes."

“Well, best of luck to you.” Alisa said amicably. “But be warned… many of our most important locations are guarded very well. If you had not been invited in to this building the Gargoyles would have torn you apart.”

Simeon sat down. The eighth person stood up. This time it was a black haired girl with glasses. She was short, shorter even then Lauren herself, and seemed somewhat timid.

“Um. Hello.” She said. “My name is Li Zhou… I’m from China. I am here to study the True History of the world.”

The bald man sitting beside Lauren nodded at her. She ignored him.

“History?” Alisa repeated. “Yes, Grey Arcadia is an excellent place to learn more about… unusual topics. What subject are you hoping to cover, specifically?”

“I haven’t decided.” Li admitted. “But I’m very interested in the development of human civilization.”

“I see.” Alisa said. “Well, I hope you are prepared… Professors here often don’t have the most favorable view of humans.”

Li Zhou nodded and took her seat. The ninth person got to her feet.

“Hello.” She said. She had the appearance of someone who had not put much thought or care for her appearance. Her medium length brown hair was somewhat unkempt, and the completely black long sleeved shirt she was wearing looked somewhat wrinkly and uncared for. “I’m an artist.”

She sat back down. Alisa opened her mouth as if to ask a question, but the girl turned her head to the side, clearly dismissing her. Alisa’s cheek twisted somewhat, as if she was holding back a scowl, as she turned to the tenth student. The girl, clearly eager, leapt to her feet.

“I’m Ellie!” She blurted. “And I want to join the Sentinels of Americana!”

She saluted, as if trying to make herself look more impressive.

“Oh, do you?” Alisa asked. “Well they’re definitely interested in graduates from Grey Arcadia… Do you have a background in magic?”

"No!" Ellie said, as if she were proud of this fact.

"I see." Alisa said. "Well, it's very difficult… if not impossible for women to join the Sentinels without a high level of magical power."

Ellie's mouth fell open in horror. Her eyes turned to Alriya Prince, who was following the exchange with interest.

"It's true." Alriya said.

"There are, of course, other ways to support the Sentinels than simply joining their ranks." Alisa went on. "Being married and having children make it all worthwhile for the soldiers…"

She went pink for a moment before hastily adjusting her words. "But of course what you want to do is all up to you." She said quickly. Ellie, looking visibly annoyed, sat down with a huff. The eleventh person stood up. This was a large, confident looking boy with blonde hair.

"Hey." He said. "I'm Mordred Pendragon. I'm here to fight-"

"Mordred." Alisa said, firmly. "Please remember where we are."

"I'm here." Mordred repeated. "To further my career as a Knight of the Order of the Dragon. Is that acceptable… My Lady?" He spoke almost disparagingly.

"Sit down." Alisa said shortly. Mordred, despite her command, remained standing. He stood staring at her, his arms crossed in front of his chest. The twelfth person looked up at him nervously, before deciding to stand up himself.

"I'm Marcus Augustus." He said. "I'm here to study… because… because it's the only offer I got." He twitched a little bit. "I… Um. Hope to graduate."

He sat down. The thirteenth boy stood up. He was a smiling boy of medium height and build.

"I'm Chris." He said. "Chris Damon. It's a pleasure to be here… It was a dream of mine to study at Grey Arcadia. I'm so happy to finally be here." He smiled widely at the group around him. "I'm from New York."

“And what will you be studying?”

His smile widened. “I haven’t decided.” He admitted. “I was thinking of studying a little bit of whatever interested me… I don’t really have a career in mind, so…”

“I see.” Alisa said. “Next?”

The fourteenth person stood up. “I’m Penelope Gearhart.” She said. “I’m from Michigan… I want to design machina.”

“Oooooooh.” Alisa said, looking very pleased. “Me too, me too! That’s what I’m studying. What are you hoping on making?”

“Well.” Penelope said, as she raised her hands to her glasses. “I’ve already started learning how to make simple things… these glasses can see through walls, for example. But I kind of hope I can start making all sorts of fun little things for people to use.”

“So you’re into making toys?”

“Well, accessories.” Penelope amended. “Cute ones.”

“Very exciting!” Alisa said. “Next.”

Penelope sat down. The fifteenth student, a boy with a round hat, got to his feet.

“Alex.” He said. He tipped his hat at them and sat back down. Alisa leaned forward as if to ask him another question, but he tilted the hat over his eyes and leaned back in his seat. This time taking his response in stride, she turned to the next.

“Next.”

The sixteenth student stood up.

“Greetings.” The girl said formally. Dressed in a rather elaborate beautiful black dress, she stood out compared to the rest of the casually dressed students. “My name is Claire Luxiana. I live here in town. I am hoping to study the occult.”

“For what purpose?” Alisa asked, her voice light and casual. “Are you hoping for some kind of career, or-“

“I am going to be a witch.” Claire said, her voice quiet, but firm. In Lauren’s opinion it sounded almost like a threat. Alisa froze. She seemed to be restraining herself.

“Next.” She said at last. Clair Luxiana sat back down, folding her hands across her lap. Lauren thought she looked rather elegant and composed. Alisa, however, looked somewhat unnerved.

The seventeenth student stood up.

“Mikael Abrams.” He said. “I’m from California.”

“And what are you hoping to study?”

He scratched his face. “Titties?”

Chris Damon was the only one who laughed. Alisa sighed.

“Next?”

The eighteenth student stood up. Lauren felt her heart racing in her chest. Two more… and then she would be expected to speak.

A tall, beautiful girl stood up.

“I am Angelica Hresvelg.” She said. “I am from Germany… I am here to study Dragon Slayers.”

“Really?” Alisa repeated, surprised. “You are interested in Draconic lore?”

“No.” Angelika denied. “My distant ancestor once slew a dragon, and I grew up fascinated by the story. It’s a famous story in my family, but very few professional academics believe it. I came here in hopes of verifying it.”

‘Hresvelg…” Alisa repeated, as if trying to remember something buried deep in the back of her mind. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard the name.”

Angelika bowed her head. “That does not surprise me.”

“Next.”

Lauren felt her heart stop in her chest as the boy sitting right next to her stood up.

“Greetings.” He said formally, as he placed his hands together and bowed. “I am Brother Tinley. I am a Monk from Tibet. I am here to study and learn everything that Grey Arcadia has to offer.”

“Yes, I was told about you.” Alisa said. “Please let me know if need any help navigating our campus. I understand that your culture is very different from ours…”

“Thank you, you are very kind.”

He sat back down. Lauren felt her heart seize up in her chest. That was it? That was all he had to say? That meant….

“Next!”

Lauren’s heart was racing as she climbed to her feet. Twenty pairs of eyes were staring at her expectantly. She felt spit well up in her throat.

“L-Lauren Frey!” She cried out. “I’m… going to do my best!”

She bent her head and stared at the ground. She could feel every single person in the room staring intently at her.

“Very well.” Alisa said, at last. “Thank you.”

Lauren felt her legs shaking as she sat back down. She did not raise her head at all. She was sure that people were still staring, and judging her.

“Now that we’ve gotten our introductions out of the way.” Alisa said. “Shall we begin?”

Lauren looked up. The group around her had turned their attention back to Alisa, who had walked back to the backside wall. The lights in the room dimmed, and the light of a projector fell onto the wall.

Alisa turned around to face them.

“Welcome to Grey Arcadia.” She said. “The fact that you have chosen to attend this institution shows that you possess unusual courage and an intense, burning passion to understand the supernatural. The vast majority of you, as you have just demonstrated, understand that there is more to the world than which can be understood by

modern science, or ordinary people. You, I am sure, understand very well what you are getting into. But for those of you who do not…"

Alisa's gaze hardened.

"I regret to inform you that attending this university means putting your life in very real danger."

There was a silence around the room. Not a stunned silence, but an accepting one. Nearly everyone in the room knew this already.

"Humans." Alisa went on. "Ordinary people… are a distinct minority on this campus. The vast majority of the student body you will interact with on a daily basis will be something other than human. A select few gladly will gladly accept you and even try to be your friends. Most will not."

Not a soul moved or twitched.

"This campus is dangerous for you." Alisa said. "The Professors that will be teaching your courses… The people who will offer you jobs and opportunities, the people you pass on the street. They hate you. They want you dead, or worse."

Lauren felt her breath hitch in her throat. Her hands were sweating. She had already known this, of course… Ophelia had told her as such. But somehow Ophelia had made the dangers of the academy seem so much less than they really were."

"Many freshmen do not survive their first year." Alisa went on, as the screen behind her flickered to a new slide. "It is not unheard for an entire year's worth of students to be eliminated within a single semester. It is very possible that all of you are going to die. It is almost certain that at least one of you will."

Chris Damon raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"It was my understanding that the University did not allow such activity." He said, leaning back in his chair.

"They do not." Alisa responded. "Yet their rules will not protect you. You will be targeted, you will be attacked. You will be used. And

there really is nothing they can do to protect yourselves. The only thing you can do is be prepared."

Charlotte Harker stood up.

"For the record." She said. "If anyone feels they are in any kind of danger, any at all… please feel free to drop by my manor. I will do everything in my power to assist you."

She crossed one arm under her chest and bowed.

"That is very gracious of you." Alisa said. "And very good advice. I would suggest that all of you become intimately familiar with everyone in this room. I promise you, you will always feel the safest and most secure surrounded by your own people."

Lauren looked around the room. She thought a lot of things about the people around her, but comfortable and secure was not one of them.

"Your safety." Alisa said. "Is perhaps more important to you than your own education. You will not learn if you are dead. It is of the utmost importance that you understand this."

Lauren's hands tightened around her legs. She felt a strong, uneasy feeling welling up inside of her. If normal people struggled to even survive at Grey Arcadia… what chance would she have?

"I would strongly suggest." Alisa went on. "That you not leave your place of residence unless it is absolutely necessary."

Simeon Walton raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"What of those of us who are confident in their abilities to defend themselves?" He asked.

"I would still advise against it." She said. Zane snorted. Alisa shot him a glare. "Yes, that goes for you too." She snapped. Turning back to Simeon, she addressed him in a more neutral tone. "It isn't worth the risk. This place is a tourist attraction for some of the most vile and powerful monsters in the world. They likely won't bother you if

you are simply going about your business, but if you actively pick fights with their people…"

Clair Luxiana raised a hand to her hair and stroked it with her fingers. She said nothing.

"Defend yourself only if absolutely necessary." Alisa said. "I will not tell you to never do it, because every situation is different… but I stress that all of you must exercise caution."

Many of the people sitting in the room were shifting their weapons back and forth in their hands. Zane, the boy with three swords, kept pushing one out of its sheath slightly, and then back inside in small, incremental movements. Mordred Pendragon raised his hand, and fire spurted out. Angelika, the tall girl reached to her side. Lauren felt her heart jump. The giant slab of steel she had thought to be some of odd decoration was actually a sword bigger than she was.

"Um." Li Zhou raised her hand. "What about those of us who can't defend ourselves?"

"Exercise extreme caution." Alisa responded. "Do not, under any circumstances, leave your residence after dark. Do not allow strangers into your home. Do not associate with dangerous individuals. Vampires, Devil, Olympians… and least of all, witches."

Lauren's gaze shot upward. Her mouth began to dry up. Before she knew what she was doing, she blurted out.

"But not all witches are bad… right?"

The entire room turned to look at her. Lauren felt her cheeks heat up and she turned her head downward. She felt a strong sense of shame. She knew she had asked a very ignorant question.

"There is." Alisa said. "Some truth to that. There are certainly different degrees of danger. Witches, in particular, may try to use you or manipulate you rather than try to actively harm you. However, generally speaking, they are still very much a threat."

She spoke as if she was explaining something simple, to someone who didn't know any better. Lauren kept her head bent, staring at

the floor.

Ophelia. Ophelia wasn't like that. Ophelia was her friend. Ophelia.. she would never have hurt her. She had every opportunity to do so, and yet…

She was there.

Lauren raised her head. Claire Luxiana was staring at her with interest, but the rest of the class were listening to Alisa continue the speech.

That was right, wasn't it? Ophelia did not hurt her, or curse her, or manipulate her. She had taken her off the street, cleaned her up, and helped her establish her life at Grey Arcadia. If it hadn't been Ophelia that found her… she would never have met The Master, and found the stability she needed to live on campus. If it hadn't been for Ophelia, and her kindness, she could never have taken that second step towards Changing Her Life.

Ophelia was a Witch. Witches were not good people. What did that mean?

It was obvious, wasn't it? Ophelia was a good person. Ophelia was a good witch. Ophelia was her friend. Ophelia could be trusted. Ophelia had been there for her when no one else ever had before. Ophelia had sacrificed an entire day to help her find her place in the world. Ophelia was good. Ophelia the Witch was good. Ophelia the Witch was a good person. Ophelia was good. Ophelia was good. Ophelia was good.

"-And please do not forget this. The dangers of Grey Arcadia are very real." Alisa continued. "Now… now that we have gotten that out of the way, perhaps we can now get started on actually discussing your education."

Charlotte Harker leaned forward, seemingly very eager to learn more.

"As I'm sure you are all aware." Alisa said. 'Grey Arcadia is the most prestigious university for studying the supernatural in the world. Most research and disciplines have been passed down through long

family histories or religious orders. It was not until the first witches arrived in this country, a land relatively untouched by the rest of the world, that magic could be properly studied and practiced in relative safety. As the United States established itself as a country, Grey Arcadia developed as a University. Due to the United States' status as neutral ground, warring factions in Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia flocked here and worked together in relative harmony to uncover the secrets of the universe."

"As a result of this cultural exchange, there is no better place on Earth to learn about the magical arts. There are alchemy students attempting to create another Philosopher's Stone. We have historians debating the true cause of the downfall of the God of Olympus. And of course we have those studying warfare, alongside their future enemies."

She closed her eyes.

"There are endless opportunities here." She said. "But you may find that finding them a bit of a challenge. Unlike natural sciences, mystic sciences tend to be undefinable. You will observe numerous contradictions and inconsistences between fields of study, or even the same practice from different parts of the world. It is the belief of the University that there is no one Universal Truth."

Lauren had no idea what any of this meant. She was beginning to feel a little bit lost. Memories of being unable to follow along with relatively simple instructions from her grade school teacher were beginning to swell up in her head. This was no different. It was all the same. She was doomed.

"What this means for you." Alisa said. "Is that what you must understand is that there is no clearly defined rules in magic. Magic, as defined by our University, is a force that can perform any action, regardless of natural laws or reason. Magic is not constrained by the laws of nature. It has no clearly defined rules or behavior. It is an unstoppable force, one that may be utilized to accomplish great and terrible things. Merely studying these arts can render one insane."

She bowed her head.

“Grey Arcadia wishes to make this University a safe place for human scholars.” She said. “However it must be noted that the pursuit of this kind of the knowledge, these kind of arcane secrets is not something that should be attempted by the faint of heart. If anyone in this room has any reservations about attempting to study here, this is your chance to back out now.

She paused, her eyes sweeping across the room. Lauren found herself freezing, her arms and legs stiffening in place.

She was that person. She was the person that had no right to be here, no right to be here. She wasn’t capable of even cooking for herself. No… she had the Master, she had her job, and she was happy with that.

Yes… maybe that was all she needed. Maybe she could spend the rest of her days with the Master. She could enjoy that same peaceful tranquility, as she had for the past two months. All she would need to do is get up, and walk out the door.

(No)

Why wasn’t she moving? She thought to herself, as she stared down at her trembling legs. Wasn’t she happy with where she was? Wasn’t she happy with her work, her standard of living, what she was doing? Wasn’t that enough?

“Last chance.” Alisa repeated.

Lauren looked up at her. She wanted to get up. She wanted to walk out. She wanted to quit. But something was telling her, that little voice in the back of her head, was screaming at her to keep going. To keep moving forward, to keep pushing herself. That was how she had met the Master, wasn’t it? That was how she had found what little happiness in her life. If she survived Grey Arcadia, it would all be worth it.

(And we’ll get to see Ophelia again)

“Not a single one of you?” Alisa probed. “You are made of braver stuff than most.”

Lauren looked around at the class, her expression doubtful. Not a single one had budged. Of course. She thought to herself, bitterly. They had known full well what they were getting into. They probably had a lot of training and study under their belts already. A lot of them had even planned out their career paths. She, with her background and personality, would surely be at the bottom of the class.

(But you will learn)

Alisa continued talking as Lauren took in a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She would succeed. She would do well. She would find happiness.

(You already have)

"How about we take a small break?" Alisa suggested. She clapped her hands, and then gestured to the table at the side of the room. The previously empty table was suddenly filled with a number of fruits and vegetables.

"We have a number of teas and juices as well." Alisa added, gesturing to another table. "Grey Arcadia doesn't have soda, so my apologies if you were expecting Coke or Pepsi products. Most of the drinks here are brewed locally."

Ophelia had said something similar, Lauren thought, as the class got to their feet. Mikael Abrams had immediately made his way over to Angelika Hresvelg and began speaking to her. Angelika flipped her hair with her hand and turned away from him as she reached for the giant weapon at her side. She lifted it easily with a single hand and placed it on her back. She was a tall girl, but the sword was clearly bigger and heavier than she was.

Penelope Gearhart, rather than make her way to the table, had approached Alisa, and the two began having a hushed, excited conversation that Lauren could not quite make out. `

It was Princess Apricot who had reached the table first. "Oh, this looks delicious!" She said enthusiastically, her head swaying back and forth.

Most of the others were still getting to their feet. Charlotte Harker seemed more interested in the class itself than the food. Her eyes fell on Paz, and she approached. She looked surprised as he raised his head towards her, but then smiled and greeted him. Mordred Pendragon sat watching them, hands folded in front of him. He was frowning. Zane, the boy carrying three swords, had moved to sit right next to him.

"Hello."

Lauren jumped. She stared up, surprised, as the unsmiling face of Clair Luxiana stared down at her.

"Did I startle you?" Claire asked, tilting her head curiously. Lauren immediately shook her head.

"No… no!" She said quickly, knowing that it would upset her if she admitted otherwise. "You just… surprised me…"

Claire nodded. The necklace she was wearing around her neck bounced a little, and upon closer inspection Lauren thought the little pieces resembled human teeth. She felt a little nauseous.

"Care to join me?" Claire inquired. Lauren, instinctively, shook her head.

"No…" She said. "I would rather not."

Claire stared at her. She seemed more puzzled than hurt. Without another word she turned and walked off to the table, and began stacking a plate filled with healthy greens.

Lauren felt a strong sense of relief, but felt a little sad too as she watched her.

"You know." Brother Tinley said softly. "She wanted to be your friend."

She turned to look at him, puzzled. He was sitting cross legged in his seat, his hands folded in front of him, his eyes closed. Lauren turned away again, flushing with embarrassment.

She wasn't hungry, and she didn't feel much like socializing with those around her. She sat awkwardly, watching those around her. It

wasn't much like high school. There wasn't a lot of laughter or gossip. If anything the atmosphere was cool and collected. It felt like everyone was sizing each other up. Lauren felt very much out of place.

When the break had ended, Alisa again took her place at the front of the room.

"Now." She said. "Let us continue…"

Chapter 4

The orientation went on for what felt like hours. Alisa described, in great detail, the facilities that were available to human students, general rules and expectations for students, and finished off by thanking the students for their time. By the time the Orientation had ended Lauren was exhausted. Being around so many people, and having to listen to Alisa for so long, had completely worn her out. She was one of the first out of the room and back onto the street.

She took in a deep breath and sighed. The orientation had gone about the way she had expected. She had felt uncomfortable throughout the entire ordeal, but she had managed to avoid any kind of emotional breakdown. But she hadn't been expected to do anything… she had barely been able to give her name. What would have happened if she had been expected to do more? What was going to happen once the semester began, in earnest? What was going to happen to her?

A beautiful, black cat was laying on the steps to one of the buildings, seemingly resting. Lauren couldn't help herself. She came to a stop and reached out a hand to the cat. The cat opened one green eye and glanced at her.

"It's rude to touch a cat you don't know." It said.

Lauren's hand froze.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She said. "I thought-"

The cat yawned and closed its eye again. Lauren stared at it for a moment before moving on. She gave one last quick apology before

stepping away, back to her home. She noticed a large, brown owl watching her. She had seen more animals during her time here than she had in her entire life back home.

It seemed that by mid-afternoon there were a lot fewer people walking the streets. This suited Lauren just fine, as she had found the crowds earlier that day to be unbearable. She took the opportunity to observe some more of the local customs as she passed by, although she made sure to keep her distance. There was a small music store called the Silent Siren. A girl with long blue hair and oddly pale clammy skin sat out front on the concrete, her head bent over her guitar. The music she played was rather tranquil and peaceful. Lauren liked it.

Just past that store was a place called Mighty Wings. A large symbol of a beautiful Angel, wings spread wide open, stood over the logo. Lauren glanced through the windows, but saw nothing to indicate just what the building was for. She passed by the Night Owl bookstore again, and found herself tempted to go inside. She decided against it, as she had been away from the Master for quite a while, and was worried that he may need her for something.

When she entered the Music Hall, however, and found the Master playing as he always did, she felt herself relax. She spent half an hour or so checking the Hall to ensure that it was still presentable, and once she was satisfied she returned to her room. She left the door open so that the faint melodies of Mozart trickled down into her room.

Now that she had returned safely, she felt strangely euphoric. In spite of everything, she had gotten through the day. She had done everything she had set out to do today. Wasn’t that exciting!

(It is!)

Lauren smiled to herself as she looked at her stack of schoolbooks she had been reading throughout these past few weeks. She had already thoroughly gone through her book that she had been assigned to read for her Historia class, and had dabbled in her Occult Literature and Magic 101 books as well. She reached over and

picked up a small one she had picked up, which was called *Secrets of the Fair Folk,* and carried it to her chair.

Like the other Occult books she had picked up, the book seemed to think that she knew more about elves and fairies than she really did. She was beginning to feel that she had signed up for a class that was too advanced for her. It was making her nervous: She had not been able to cast the beginner spells in Magic 101 either. That was two classes that she felt that she wouldn't do very well in, and she hadn't even attended a single class yet.

(What about the other two?)

Lauren cast a look at the two giant textbooks that she had spent the past few weeks tearing through. The Historia textbook, a giant tome titled *The Historia of the World,* dated further back than any contemporary history book she had ever read, dating back to the Mesozoic era. She had just been reading about the Outer War, in which Dinosaur warriors defended the planet from invading Starspawn, creatures that had seemed to have come from the stars. It had been incredibly interesting, and she wanted to read more, but she had already been reading for three hours and had felt a need to dip into her other books as well.

The other book, titled *Political Powers of the New Millenium,* covered much more recent situations. Specifically, the modern political powers that controlled the world behind the scenes. Lauren had read this one much more selectively, trying to isolate terms and phrases that Ophelia had thrown out during their day together.

She found two of her main points of interest almost immediately: The Noctis and the Hellraisers. Ophelia, she knew, had been a member of the Noctis, and was at odds with the Hellraisers. As it turned out, these were two major political powers in Europe that considered themselves ideological opposites. The Noctis, led by the three Brides of Dracula, occupied Eastern Europe, while the Hellraisers, led by a single Grand High Witch, resided somewhere to the North. The book was overtly neutral, and didn't seem to want to accuse either side of wrongdoing. Lauren was still trying to piece

together their general policies and beliefs, although she had the very strong impression that the Hellraisers could be considered outright anarchists.

Where did that leave her? Two classes that she would definitely fail, and two classes that she might fail. That certainly did nothing to reassure her.

(Two classes that you might PASS)

"Camilla." Lauren said aloud. "You always like making the situation sound better than it actually is."

She lay down on her chair and raised the book, cracking it open. She was intent on studying, but something deep inside her, perhaps that primal need for some kind of social interaction with another person, kept her thoughts on Camilla.

(You're always selling yourself short)

"And you." Lauren said. "Expect way too much of me."

She stared down at the page and began to read about the history of the scientific understanding of the human soul. Although she read the words, and processed them, Camilla was still speaking.

(You can take different classes next semester)

"And fail those too?" Lauren asked, irritably.

(You worry too much)

Lauren sighed, trying to turn her full attention back to the book.

(Look.) Camilla said. (Remember three months ago? Remember when you ran away from home, risking life and limb to go to a school that you weren't sure even existed? Remember when you thought that you would never, ever make it?))

"I do."

(And before that.) Camilla said. (Remember when you thought that you would never be accepted to a college at all?)

"This isn't exactly my dream school."

(Yeah, it is pretty dreary.) Camilla admitted. (None of those guys were my type.)

Lauren snorted.

(And it's dark, and depressing.) Camila went on. (And the music here sucks.)

"Camila!" Lauren said sharply. It might have been her imagination, but she almost felt that the music coming from the Hall had diminished somewhat.

(But still.) Camila went on, ignoring her. (You like it here. You like it a lot.)

Lauren stared at the page, not reading a word.

"I do." She said softly. "Very much."

(So what's the problem?)

She sighed.

"I don't belong here." She said. "You saw those people. You heard them speak. They're better than I am."

(So?) Camilla pressed. (Why do you care?)

"I can't compete." Lauren said. "I can't… do…. Anything!"

She closed the book with a snap and leaned back in the chair. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. The emotions that had been bottled up within her all day were coming out. Slowly, but surely. She could not express herself out in public, but here… when she was alone… when she was with Camila… she could really be herself.

Lauren was so agitated that her imaginary conversation didn't go anywhere for quite a while. She sat there fuming. She thought of Charlotte Harker, and how confident and sure of herself she seemed. She thought of Angelika Hresvelg, and how she had lugged around that giant sword with seemingly no effort. She thought of Claire Luxiana, and how she had tried to be her friend, before she drove her away without even a second thought.

“No one would want to be my friend.” She said aloud. “I’m not good enough.”

(But I’m your friend.)

Lauren turned in her chair. She did not respond. Instead Camlla continued speaking.

(Friends aren’t difficult to have. Nor are they special. They’re just people who are there.)

Lauren said nothing. She sat like that for quite a while. She must have dozed off, because by the time she finally sat up a couple of hours had passed. The music from the Hall had gotten a little bit louder. Lauren sat and listened for a moment. It was an upbeat, vibrant piece. It must have woken her up.

She still hadn’t gotten any studying done. A strong sense of guilt and shame welled up within her as she reached for the book. She was worthless, she thought to herself as she cracked open the book. This was all pointless. In the end it would all end in the same way.

..

She did not leave the building for a couple of days after that. She spent the vast majority of her time preparing for her classes, and assisting the Master. Her nervousness must have been obvious, because he kept playing her favorite symphonies whenever she was at work. She greatly appreciated it, but felt a little guilty at the thought that the Master had done more for her than she ever had for him.

Her school bag was packed and ready to go days before she was due for her first class. She kept glancing at it anxiously whenever she passed by its place in her room, or whenever she looked over her schedule for her first semester. She hadn’t taken it out yet… she had hardly gone out at all since orientation. With the streets of Grey Arcadia busier than she had ever seen them, she had no interest in leaving the safety of the Hall of Music.

Historia, Introduction to Political Evils. Magic 101. And Occult Literature. She had not wanted to attend more than one class a day,

so she had scheduled to only attend one class a day. This would, she hoped, give her plenty of time throughout to rest up and prepare for her next class. It was only a matter of time until she broke down again… hopefully, having a three day weekend to herself every week would be enough to recover when that happened.

Her first ever college class would be Historia. She wasn't' sure what to expect. The book she had been reading seemed like something out of some insane thirteen year old boy's fantasy of what history was like. She had been willing to believe that Dinosaurs had fought Aliens in some ancient prehistoric war, but when the book had tried to tell about the Fall of the Olympian Gods and how that had led to humanity taking over the planet. She was becoming increasingly skeptical of Grey Arcadia's version of history.

Before she knew it, it was time to go. She tried to stop her heart beating in her chest as she stepped past the Master and towards the front door. She sighed, feeling a little despondent, as she pushed open the door and stepped back into the street.

The streets of Grey Arcadia were dark. The torches of black flame on the street were lit, and the darkness surrounded the buildings and streets so completely that the light of the sun could not be made out, although an outline of it could be made out in the sky. Lauren stared at it for a while, wondering whether the sun was still dangerous to look at under these conditions, before shouldering her bag and stepping down the street.

She was thankful that the streets weren't nearly as busy as they had been on Orientation Day. If anything it seemed rather quiet. The streets seemed much less rowdy than they had the day before, and it took her a while to figure out why.

Sitting on the curb of the street was a large, white wolf. A large, blue vest with the words POLICE inscribed on it was wrapped around its chest, and a charming blue hat was on its head.

It was a rather odd sight. Lauren stared. The dog turned to look at her, and she let out a surprised sound.

“Good evening.” The wolf said pleasantly. “Enjoying your day?”

“I… yes.” Lauren said, faintly. “I was just… on my way to class.”

The wolf nodded. “Is this your first day?” He asked.

“It is.” She said, still a little befuddled. The wolf bared its teeth. Lauren almost took a step back, before realizing that it was trying to smile at her.

“It is always a good thing to see human students attending the University. Please feel free to whistle if you are in need of a police officer. Alright?”

“A-alright…”

The dog nodded at her and turned its attention back to the road. Lauren bit her tongue, unsure of whether it would be polite to ask if she could give him a pat on the head. In the end she decided it would be best to simply move on.

Could all the animals talk? She wondered, as she observed a couple of owls sitting on a perch, staring down at the street below. She hadn’t read anything about this in any of her books. It was probably one of those things that people here just took for granted. She worried just how much she didn’t know.

She had planned the route to the History Building before she had left. She had little trouble finding it, as it was somewhat hard to miss. A number of statues stood arranged in a circle in front of the building. Lauren stopped to give them a glance. She briefly worried that they might be Gargoyles, like the ones that had been standing outside the building where she had had her orientation, but a plaque sitting in front of it. She stepped forward to read it:

The History of the Noctis III

Vlad the Impaler becomes Dracula: The King of the Noctis

She looked up at the statue. The figure of a tall, intimidating looking man stood above her. His armor and chest looked as if it had been torn to shreds, and the spear her held in his hand was broken and looked nearly useless. Despite that, he had an air of triumph about

him: His eyes had a strange, piercing quality to them. Behind him stood a smaller, younger girl. She seemed to be smiling as she raised a small crown above his head.

She looked around at the statues around the yard and saw that the story seemed to continue, and then cycle back to the beginning. How fascinating.

She would have loved to stick around the yard, but she thought it wasn't in her best interest. She wanted to be early, every day. She made her way to the building and opened the front door.

The first thing she saw was the gigantic, black head of a bird. She had become so accustomed that she didn't think anything of it, until the figure turned around and she saw that the head was attached to the body of a person. This was either another witch, as she had come to expect, or a Beastman… a half man, half animal hybrid.

Lauren quickly stepped past the bird, who seemed to be putting up flyers on a nearby billboard, and checked the directory. Her Historia Class was on the third floor. She took in a deep breath and headed for the stairs. She met no one as she circled up the stairwell and came to a stop outside the third floor. She opened the door.

She found herself in a long, dark hallway. This too, was a little bit empty. She felt herself panic a little as she looked around. Where was everyone? Was she late?

She stepped forward and looked at the numbers on the doors, trying to figure out which one was for her class. She passed by several before she arrived at her destination. The door was already open. She swallowed nervously and stepped inside.

There was no one here. She stared, blinking, at rows and rows of empty seats.

"Oh, you're a little bit early."

She turned her head to the front of the room, to the professor's desk, and had to stop herself from screaming. Sitting at the computer, pen in claw, was a dinosaur. Rows of pointed, jagged

teeth jutted out from its mouth and its reptilian, predatory eyes were yellow and slitted.

She froze in place as the thing stood up, adjusted its tie, and walked over to her. Its vicious looking toe claws striking the stone floor.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The Dinosaur said brightly, bobbing its head up and down. "I take it that you've never seen a Raptor before?"

"I… no…"

"I thought not." It said. "Most humans believe us to be extinct… Fewer have even see us."

He bowed his head to her. "I am Professor Acuzio Aegea. I am a renowned historian and author of *The Historia of the World."*

Lauren gave a surprised start. "You wrote-"

He seemed to beam. "The textbook you were assigned, yes." He said eagerly. "Have you read it yet?"

"Well… yes." Lauren said, bending her head down to fumble with her bag. She unzipped the bag and slid the book out of its place. She held it out to him.

He held out a claw. "May I…"

She handed over the book to him. Professor Acuzio stared at the book, and it flipped open of its own accord to where she had finished reading.

"You've made a lot of headway already." He commented, his eyes flitting over the page. "Do you have a particular interest in the Fall of Olympus?"

"N-no…" Lauren stammered, feeling a little self conscious. "I've been… trying to read the entire thing." She gulped nervously after she finished speaking.

"Really?" Acuzio asked, sounding intrigued. "Could you tell me who defended the planet against the Starspawn sixty five millions ago?"

Lauren hesitated.

“It was… the Dinosaurs, wasn’t it?” She asked, cautiously, unsure of herself. Acuzio nodded.

“That’s right!” He said, beaming. “You have been paying attention. I think you will do just fine here.”

“So it’s all true?” Lauren asked, as she took the book back from him. “Every word?”

“Well, as true as we can divine.” He said. “My people are many things, but we are not historians. Back then we saw no purpose in documenting our history, as many of our Kings and greatest minds survived for millions of years afterward. It’s certainly possible that some details are incorrect… but I can assure you that the grand picture is indeed true.”

Lauren stared at the book in awe. She suddenly found herself very eager to get back into reading it.

“Oh, but my apologies.” The Professor said. “I never asked for your name…”

“I’m Lauren Frey.” Lauren said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise.” The Professor said. “Ah, I think another pupil is at the door.

Lauren turned around. Standing in the door was a rather pretty young Chinese girl.

“Hello.” She said. “Is this the Historia class?”

“It is, it is!” Professor Acuzio said joyously, as he made his way over to her. Like Lauren, the girl looked surprised at first.

“Ah, but you’re another human.” He said. “Lauren here is as well. Perhaps you would like to sit together? I know how you humans feel safer in numbers…”

He waved Lauren over.

“Lauren, this is Li Zhou.” He said. Lauren stared at the other girl.

“Oh, I remember you from orientation.” Li Zhou said, as she held out her hand. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.” Lauren said quietly, as she took her hand.

“I’ll be sure to send more humans your way.” The Professor said. “Why don’t you get yourselves situated and wait for class to begin?”

“Yes.” Li Zhou said. “I’ll do that.” She turned and walked to the seats that the professor had indicated. Lauren thanked the Professor one last time before hurriedly following along behind her. She followed her up the stairs to the seat in the upper left corner.

Li Zhou did not look up at her she set her things up in her seat. Lauren stood awkwardly, bag held out in front of her. She had not expected to meet another girl from orientation again, not after being unable to find Ophelia.

Li Zhou looked up at her. “Can I help you?” She asked.

Lauren was taken aback. “N-no…” She stammered. “I was just….”

Li Zhoi turned back to her desk. She reached into her bag and pulled out her copy of *The History of the World* and lay it on her desk.

“I was…. Just surprised to see you again.” Lauren amended. Li Zhou looked up at her. She looked a little surprised.

“Oh.” She said. But before she could respond properly, another girl walked into the room. Li Zhou turned to look as the Professor spoke to her, and Lauren felt the conversation was over.

She took her seat beside Li Zhou as more and more students came into the room. Lauren tried to puzzle out what each and every one of them was. There were a number of people wearing thick black cloaks and hoods that covered their entire bodies, who all sat together in the front of the room, conversing with each other with their heads bent. A girl with wild black hair and glowing red eyes entered on her own, and sat down on her own. Lauren watched as she pulled out a blood red lollipop from her pocket and began sucking on it. It was a while before the next human student came in.

“Greetings.”

It was the boy with three swords, Zane. He had also been in orientation with them. He bowed his head towards and took his seat,

his eyes flitting over the crowd in front of him. Lauren stared at him, and his weapons. He ignored her.

A handful more people came in after that. Several more fauns, a male and a couple of females came in together. Lauren was a little shocked at how one of the females was not wearing a top: she had tied her long hair her chest to cover it up, but otherwise was completely naked, her legs and crotch were covered only by her fur They sat down together as well, shooting dirty looks at them.

"Filthy creatures." Zane commented, placing a hand on his sword. "If they touch you, come to me."

Lauren stared at him, startled. Li Zhou shot him a look, and then nodded.

"Very well." She said at last. "But don't expect me to convert to your religion."

Zane snorted. "It doesn't matter what you believe." He said. "The Order of the Dragon will always be there to fight for humanity."

Lauren looked between them, unsure of what to make of this exchange. She tried to rack her mind on all that she had read since she had arrived here: She could not remember coming across the 'The Order of the Dragon' in any of her textbooks. She had heard the name a couple of times since she had arrived, but she had not realized it was a religion. She wondered if it was a group associated with the Noctis or Hellraisers.

"I believe it is time to begin." Professor Acuzio said brightly, his tail wagging energetically behind him as he strode to the front of the room. "Welcome to your Historia Class. It has been a pleasure meeting each and every one of you…. Olympian, Vampire, Human, and Witch alike. I hope that all of you will be perfectly comfortable learning from me… I assure you, I will not attack."

"As long as he's not hungry, anyway." Zane murmured, leaning across his desk. Li Zhou sat, stony faced. Lauren had the impression that she very much agreed with him.

“The Historia of the World.” Professor Acuzio went on. “Is so shrouded in mystery, in oral tradition, in simple misunderstandings, that people all over the world can believe wildly different things, even within the same communities and cultures. As such, it has been extremely difficult for historians like myself to truly document all major events and cultural shifts over the Eons. My life’s work, *The Historia of the World,* was my attempt at describing, in extremely broad strokes, the entire history of the world. From the Golden Age of my people, the Primordials, to the rise of Humanity.”

One of the female fauns in the front let out an audible, loud snort, but the Professor ignored her.

“In Historia we will be covering topics that span millions of years.” He said. “In other history classes you would generally focus on individuals. Leaders, and how they helped shape societies. However we are covering such broad strokes of time that it will be impossible for us to do that. We are covering millions of years of material, after all. Our goal in class is to learn and understand the general progression of history of our planet, and all of the supernatural aspects that led us to this point. This field of study is known as ‘Historia.”

Lauren had never been good at following speeches. She could feel her attention waning, although she desperately wanted to pay attention. She looked to her side and saw that Li Zhou was already taking notes. Feeling a little self conscious, she reached for her own pen and flipped open her own notebook.

“To that end.” The Professor continued. “It is very, very important to you that you acknowledge that the history you may have been taught in school may be wrong. Now, I don’t know everything about your backgrounds, or your previous education, but I know very well how the same events can be muddied by different groups of people. One of the things I would most like to impress upon all of you is to look past your own cultural boundaries and societal perspectives in order to truly understand our history.’

Li Zhou looked up. She was frowning. She looked as if she was about ready to ask a question, but before she could the girl sitting up front raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"You're not a Hellraiser are you?" The girl asked. "I'm afraid I cannot take you completely seriously if you are…"

The hooded figures in the corner adjusted somewhat. They turned their heads over to her, glaring. The girl sat, her heels on her desk, smiling confidently. When she turned her head to glance at the hooded figures Lauren could see fangs jutting out of her mouth.

"I am not allowed to talk about politics." The teacher answered. "My apologies."

"Good answer." The girl crowed, as she turned back to face him. "I guess you're not a Hellraiser after all." She suddenly adjusted herself so that she was sitting ramrod straight. "I… will everything I can learn from you, sir." Her voice had completely changed. It had become light and fluttery, almost flirtiatious. It took Lauren completely aback.

One of the hooded figures stood up.

"And what exactly do you mean by that?" The girl snapped. She raised her arm, and a long, spindly finger with a gnarled clawlike nail pointed at the vampire. "Do you have a problem with us, vampire?"

The black haired girl lazily placed her lollipop back in her mouth. "Well, yes." She said. "Hellraiser Witches are disgusting, depraved individuals who don't bathe properly and smell. If a Hellraiser was teaching this class I would have walked out on the spot-"

Lauren yelped as a burst of magical energy shot out of the Witch's finger and slammed into the Vampire's desk, right next to her heel. She seemed relatively unbothered by this, merely shifting about in place at the attack.

"That is enough!" Professor Acuzio snarled, stepping in between them. "There will be no fighting in this class!"

“I’m not fighting, sir.” The vampire said innocently. “I was just asking a question.”

Acuzio ignored her. His attention was firmly on the Hellraiser Witches, all of whom had gotten to their feet.

“Perhaps I should have informed you.” He said quietly, his claw scratching at his tie. “That political debates between the Noctis and Hellraisers will not be tolerated in this class.”

Lauren found herself frozen in her seat. Zane had leaned in front of her protectively, hand gripped around his sword.

There was a tense silence. At long last, the Witch lowered her hand.

“We are here.” The Witch said, her voice slow and considerate. “To better understand The Age of Chaos. We are not here to be insulted…”

“I understand that.” Acuzio said. He turned around and an angry, bestial eye focused on the vampire girl “And I will suggest that other students not antagonize you..”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to offend anyone.” The Vampire said quickly, as she got to her feet. “I’m so sorry, professor…”

To Lauren’s shock, the Vampire strode across the room towards the Witches. She held out her arms wide and smiled brightly.

“Kiss and make up?” She asked them, smirking.

Lauren wasn’t completely sure what happened next. There was a loud BANG, like a gunshot, and the girl’s head recoiled backward, as if hit.

When she swung back, there was a stream of black liquid running down the middle of her head. There was no longer any expression of amusement or mirth. She looked furious.

“I said NO FIGHTING!” Acuzio roared as he pushed the vampire girl away with the back of his claw. The vampire’s expression again changed immediately back to that of a harmless school girl.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” She cried out, placing a hand on his arm. “I didn’t mean-“

“Please take your seat.” He told her. “And please stop talking.”

“Yes sir!”

She gave him a mock salute, and then turned around and marched back to her seat. She caught sight of Lauren watching her, and winked. Lauren recoiled. She felt repulsed.

The Hellraiser Witches, however, seemed unwilling to cooperate.

“Professor, she needs to-“

“You both have been warned.” The Professor said. “Sit down.”

The hooded figures gave stood still for a moment, staring straight ahead, and then took their seats. Zane relaxed.

“Thank you.” Professor said. He turned around to his desk, and the chalk on the board around him began to darken around on the board.

“I suppose this is my fault.” The Professor began. “My apologies. I did not think it was necessary to inform you that fighting amongst yourselves is not part of the curriculum.

The vampire girl shifted.

“It’s not your fault, sir.” She said. The Hellraiser shot her another look from under her hood: this time Lauren could clearly make out glowing yellow eyes.

“Whatever the case will be, I expect this to be the last instance of conflict.” He said. “Whenever you are in this room you are to be discussing historia. Is that clear?”

He looked from the vampire, to the Hellraisers, to the Fauns, and then up to the humans. Lauren felt an intense burst of fear as his eyes fell on her. His reptilian, yellow eyes were quite unsettling.

“Now.” He said. “Where was I?”

They spent the rest of the session going over what they be would be covering over the next fifteen weeks. The Golden Age of the

Primordials, The Dark Age of the Primordials, the Age of Chaos, The Age of Olympus, and the Age of Man. During his explanation Lauren was surprised to see Li Zhou raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Why so much focus on the Primordials?" She asked, twisting her pen around her finger as she stared down at him. "We're covering both their Golden Age and their Downfall?"

"Yes." Professor Acuzio said. "The Age of the Primordials is the longest age by far… spanning some hundred and thirty million years or so. And there was quite a bit of overlap with the Age of Chaos… No one is exactly sure when the Age of the Primordials ended and when the Age of Chaos began. The Gods of Olympus even believed that Chaos was the beginning of time."

At this the Fauns sitting up front looked up. They looked very offended at this. The male stood up as if he wanted to make a statement, but Li Zhou interrupted him.

"Among humans dinosaurs are considered to have gone extinct 65 million years ago. Was that around the time the Age of Chaos began?"

The Raptor shook his head.

"We can't know for sure." He said. "Which is why we are dedicating so much time to it in class. The Age of Chaos is, by far, the most undocumented part of the planet's history. Speculating on the downfall of the Primordials, and what truly happened during the early stages of the Age of Chaos, is going to take a lot of class time."

Li Zhou nodded. She was frowning. Lauren wondered what was going on in her mind.

By the time the class ended they had gone over the syllabus for the semester. Professor Acuzio had told them to read up on the Golden Age of the Primordials, and dismissed them.

Lauren, Zane, and Li Zhou gathered their things in silence. Lauren did not want to leave on her own: The Vampire was throwing

longing glances back at them.

"Could you escort me out, please?" She asked Zane, as the Hellraiser Witches passed by the Vampire. Little sparks of flame shot out from under their cloaks, and the Vampire hissed.

"Yes, of course." He said. "And you?"

Li Zhou nodded. "Of course." She said. "Thank you."

Zane led the girls down the steps to the stairs. Lauren turned her head away from the vampire, unwilling to look at her. She watched as the fauns discussed the lesson quietly amongst themselves. One of the females ripped a small piece of paper off from her book and began to chew it.

They reached the door without incident and when they entered the hall Zane turned around to face them.

"Do you need an escort to go home, or…?"

"I think we'll be fine." Li Zhou said, glancing at Lauren. "Most of the attacks on campus occur between people the victims know… Can we count on you being here every day?"

"Yes." Zane said, nodding. "Please take care of yourselves."

And with that he turned and left them, his head held high. Lauren watched at him, and then turned to Li Zhou.

"So, um…" Lauren said, twisting audibly. "What did you think of the class?"

Li Zhou shook her head. "I found it very lacking." She said.

"Well it is only our first day." Lauren offered, tentatively.

"Hm." Li Zhou said. "I doubt it will get better." She turned away. "I suppose I will see you next week." She offered. And then she was gone.

Lauren stared after her, a little put off by her abrasiveness. She wondered what she had done to drive her away. She thought back to Ophelia, and how she had taken the time to really get to know

her, and help her. Her chest twinged. She was beginning to feel that she would never meet anyone like that again.

She climbed back down the stairs, out the front door, and back into the yard. She didn't even glance at the statues this time: She was too upset, and emotionally drained. She wanted to go home, have some time for herself, and get back to work.

"Camila, we're going to need to talk." Lauren breathed to herself, as she hurried along the dark streets of Grey Arcadia. She felt a little bit light headed. This was only her first day of class and already she was feeling a little bit overwhelmed, although nothing had really even happened.

When she stepped back inside the Hall of Music, however, and that familiar brilliant organ playing hit her ears, she felt herself relax somewhat. She found herself climbing up the steps to the organ before the Master.

"Welcome." He said. "Back to my castle."

She bowed to him.

"Master." She said.

"How go your studies?"

She hesitated. As fond as she was of the Master, in her own way, he wasn't exactly the sort of person she felt comfortable expressing herself to. She couldn't talk to him about Ophelia, about the fight in class, her worries and fears, her concerns about the future. She couldn't say anything to him.

"This." He said. "Too shall pass." He said nothing more. Lauren gasped as the music surrounding her suddenly became even more elegant and beautiful. Tears welled up in her eyes as she bowed again.

"Thank you, Master…" She murmured, wiping away her tears as she straightened herself up. "I'm… going to keep at it."

She turned and made her way back to her room.

(What happened to needing to talk to someone?) Camila teased, as she turned through the door into her room. Lauren sighed as she set down her bag and flopped down into her bed, stomach first.

Lauren said nothing.

(I thought you wanted to talk)

"I do." Lauren said, aloud. "But I… just can't do it."

(Why?)

"I don't…" She gulped, the tears still running down her face. "I don't know."

(You can talk to me)

"But you're-"

(Here's what you should do) Camila said, brightly. (Pretend everyone you talk to is me. That should help you talk to people)

"But-"

(Or Ophelia.) Camila said. (You want to see her again, right…?)

Lauren closed her eyes. "More than anything…"

(You have to keep pushing.) Camilla urged her. (Like your Master said, right? If you keep pushing, if you keep making new friends, if you keep taking new and more difficult classes… you will see her again. And when she sees how far you've grown… you will make her very happy)

Lauren placed her head in her pillow. "You think so?"

(I know so.) Camila said, confidently. (I also know if you give up now that that's never going to happen. You need to keep moving)

"Keep… moving…" Lauren whispered. She felt exhausted. If she allowed herself, she probably could have fallen asleep right there in the middle of the day. But she couldn't do that. Not now. Not after everything that had happened.

She pushed herself up and off the bed. She slid back onto the floor, and then got to her feet. She made her way back to her bag, and

pulled out the *Historia of the World.*

"Fourteen more classes to go…." Lauren murmured, as she thumbed through the book. "Thank you, Camilla."

She set the book down at her little desk and began to work. She had already read quite a bit ahead. She fetched another bookmark from her desk, marked the spot where she had reached, and flipped back to the Age of the Dinosaurs.

No, the proper term was Age of the Primordials, Dinosaur was a classification invented by man… they did not think of themselves as such. And they encompassed many more creatures than what could be traditionally be considered dinosaurs. The very first living beings on the planet lived in a culture and time very different than her own. Primordials respected nothing but strength, and lacked familial bonds. Females were expected to fight alongside males in combat, eggs were disguised as simple stones until hatching, in which whatever creature was born was expected to fend for itself. And then the Starspawn came…

Lauren read until it felt like her eyes would fall out. The passages were long and drawn out, and went into a staggering amount of detail. Acuzio had, she was sure, put all of his knowledge and experience into these words. By the time she had finished reviewing the text she was exhausted: She had hoped to flip back to where she had been in the text, but now she felt too tired.

She stood up and made her way to the door. She headed out, greeted the master, and spent an hour or so maintaining the Hall. Many of the guests, some of which she was beginning to recognize by sight, greeted her cordially as she went about her business. The Master, possibly due to the vast array of guests at the moment, did not play her favorite songs as he usually did. Instead he played different pieces. Ones that Lauren found herself appreciating almost as much.

When she returned to her room she went back to her book. Although she had not taken a proper rest, somehow most of her

exhaustion had simply gone away. She sat down, flipped back to the end of the book, and continued to read.

She found herself completely lost, right away. Reading about Zeus and his desperate attempts to retain his power was even more convoluted and ridiculous than she had anticipated. She couldn't even keep the names of all of his various consorts straight. After about fifty pages she gave up. She was done.

She felt an incredible feeling of guilt as she pushed herself away from the book. Her mind felt like it was going to explode. No… she had to keep studying. She had to. If she didn't keep working, she was going to fail. She was going to fail, she was going to fail…

She stood up and walked to her bed. She was going to fail. She thought to herself as she fell onto the bed, and fell right to sleep.

Chapter 5

She had gone to bed so early in the day that she woke up far earlier than she usually did. She sat up for a while, before jolting out of bed. She had completely forgotten her next class, and for a moment she feared that she was going to be late.

But thankfully she was not expected to attend her Occult Literature class for another five hours. She relaxed, her shoulders drooping, before remembering that she hadn't reviewed the textbook the night before. She quickly got it out, and once she had sat down in her chair, reviewed it.

Occult Literature seemed to be the study of works pertaining to the supernatural. These were not necessarily fictitious works, as she had expected, but instead a study and review of some of the most revered classics that the magical beings of the world had produced. They would be covering not only novels, but philosophical works as well. She had taken it upon herself to check out one book on her reading list: *The Road To Hell.* It was about a Witch who, upon signing her contract, loses her sense of identity. She had already finished it, but had found herself thinking more about Witches as a concept rather than the story itself. Witches, according to the novel,

were ordinary humans who were converted into monsters following a pact, or contract, with a demon. The Witch in the novel had signed a contract with a demon known for her fiery temper and beauty. As a result her hair turned to flames and she became irresistibly beautiful.

Lauren had been thinking of Ophelia every time she had picked up the novel. The message and overall point of the story went completely over her head because she was trying to figure out whether or not something similar had happened to Ophelia. By the time she had finished she was wondering more about if this was an accurate depiction of real witches more than she was wondering about what had happened to the protagonist after she had turned on her own family.

The textbook she had been assigned for this class, *Hell and Black Skies,* was a collection of essays and short stories from writers from a wide range of backgrounds. The stories themselves had been a little hard for her to follow, so she had flipped to the back to get to the biographies on the writers. She had found these much more interesting, as it gave her an idea of what the world was like outside of Grey Arcadia. These were a motley collection of witches, vampires, humans, and more. Lucille Langley, the writer that Ophelia so admired, had an essay in the book. Lauren thought she would start with her first.

Dragons, she found, ruled the world in ancient times. But upon forming a closer relationship with humans, evolved and took human shape, forming a new race. The Dracos. Lucille went on to explain that the blood of Dragons still flowed very strongly in modern humans, although it very rarely surfaced. Lauren tapped her chin thoughtfully as she read. Ophelia had described Lucille Langley as being the top mind in her field of study, and Lauren could see why. Even a complete neophyte like herself could feel her enthusiasm and knowledge bursting from the page. She flipped back to the biography page and looked at her picture again. She was a surprisingly beautiful woman, with wild blonde eye and piercing

eyes. Her glasses, Lauren thought, somehow made her look more sophisticated, and intimidating.

The bio in the back said that she was a member of the Order of the Dragon… like Zane had been. Lauren wondered whether it was possible they knew each other.

She read a couple of more essays, this time picking two out at random. One revolved around things called Soul Weapons, weapons that had been used so vigorously by great warriors that their very soul became entwined with them. The other was a short story about a Witch, training to take her contract. Lauren found this second one much more interesting, and read through it twice. She was surprised at how much work and effort it took for a girl to become a witch. She had assumed that they would just take anyone. But in this story, the girl went through grueling and exhausting trials to improve her magical abilities so that she would survive the process. She was trained relentlessly by her Superiors to prepare her mind and body for the Master. It was presented in an almost romantic light.

She found it kind of inspiring. It wasn't all that different from what Camila had told her to do. Just keep fighting and clawing your way to happiness. When the girl was told at the end she had proven herself worthy, and she started crying… Lauren almost felt like crying herself.

She hadn't yet gone about her duties in the Hall, so she got to her feet and attended to them. The Master's music was as beautiful as ever, as she cleaned the hall and wiped down the chairs. When she finished she still had a couple of hours to head off to class. She gathered her things, her books, and then set off.

Again she was well on track to being very early: so far, so good. She had calmed down since the night before, but again she felt uncomfortable as she navigated the dark streets of Grey Arcadia. Her time outside the Hall, she was beginning to realize, was limited. The more she interacted with the people of Grey Arcadia, the more cracks would begin to show in her armor. She needed to find a way straight to class without being harassed by store owners or passerby.

She always felt as if eyes were always on her as she walked along the streets, and she was becoming increasingly wary of those looks.

She had once again planned out her route ahead of time, but what she had not realized when she had been looking at the map was that the route she had selected took her straight through a university park. Gnarled trees stood on either end of the path as she nervously looked around. She caught sight of a vampire girl sitting in a tree, reading a book. She looked up as she passed and watched as Lauren walked by.

By the time she found the end of the park she cast a sigh of relief as she turned around to give it one last look. The sign read 'Yew Park' and had a short commemorative message to a woman named Amaris Yew, who had been a major supporter of the university's literature department in the early 1900's. Lauren wondered who she was.

She could see the building just down the road, facing the park. Relieved, she walked forward towards the building.

Two more vampire girls were sitting out in front of the building. One with bright red hair, and the other with long white hair. They looked up as she approached, and immediately stood up.

Lauren stopped in her tracks. A burst of fear ran through her. She had been extremely uncomfortable when the vampire in he Historia had met eye contact with her. But she had not had the chance to speak to her.

"Hello!" The girl with white hair said warmly, smiling. She was an elegant creature, with perfect pale skin and stunning silvery eyes. She was lithe and gentle looking. Lauren had no trouble imaging her luring in any boy that looked her way. "Is this your first year at Grey Arcadia?"

"Y-yes…" Lauren stammered, taking aback. Still smiling, the girl glanced at her friend, who held up a pen and clipboard.

"We're members of the student council." She explained. "This is Amber… she's a member of the Noctis. My name is Samaiya. I'm an

independent. We're conducting surveys about what students think about the university… can we have a moment of your time?"

She seemed completely sincere.

"O-okay…"

"Excellent." Samaiya beamed. Her eyes seemed to almost shine. Lauren couldn't tear her eyes away from them. She gestured towards her friend Amber, who raised her pen and nodded a them. She was much fiercer looking than her friend, and seemed to almost glower at her. Lauren found herself almost immediately regretting her decision.

"There's no need to be nervous." Samaiya said smoothly, as if she knew what she was thinking. "I won't let her bite you."

That didn't exactly reassure her. Samaiya, still smiling, tilted her head to the side.

"How are you enjoying Grey Arcadia?" She asked, her voice light and friendly. "Is it to your liking, or were you expecting more?"

Lauren couldn't keep looking at those eyes. Something about them made her feel as if she were being sucked in. She looked down at the ground.

"I…" She murmured. "I like it here."

"Really?" Samaiya asked. "How so?"

"Well… I always wanted to go to college." Lauren said. "But I didn't think I would ever be able to go. When I got accepted here, it was like a dream come true."

"Do you like the city?"

Lauren had to think.

"It's too early for me to say." She said at last. "It's certainly… it's certainly very scary. I don't like walking around by myself, but there are places… there are people that I like being around. And I think… I think I like it here."

"Very good." Samaiya purred. "So you don't feel safe on campus?"

“I do not.”

“Do you feel as if the police are doing their jobs?”

“There was a fight in my first class.” She said. “Between a vampire and some Hellraiser Witches.”

The red haired girl looked up. She was staring rather intently at Lauren. Lauren felt her heart stop: The glare was one of the most intense she had ever seen.

“We’re not supposed to fight in class.” She snapped. “You’re lying!”

Samaiya turned around. Her long hair briefly fell across her face so that Lauren could not see it. Amber flinched, and then lowered her gaze back to the clipboard. Samaiya turned back around. She was still smiling.

“Forgive her.” She said. “She’s very passionate about these things…”

“Are fights common on campus?” Lauren asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Oh yes.” Samaiya said immediately. “Very. They- that is to say, the Noctis- are hoping to put a stop to it at some point in the future.”

“Shouldn’t the University be the one to deal with it?” Lauren asked. Samaiya’s smile faded somewhat. Lauren feared for a moment that she had asked a rather offensive or ignorant question, but when Samaiya spoke it was in a soft, gentle tone.

“The University.” She said. “Is an American foundation. One that believes in free speech absolutism. It believes that the best ideas, in an academic setting, are the ones that will win out and become popular.”

Lauren must have looked very confused, because she elaborated. “The Hellraisers.” She said. “Fundamentally believe that violence- that subjugating their enemies through force- is an acceptable means of discourse. If you don’t like your king, you should kill him and take his place. If you’re angry at your lover, you should strangle them in your sleep and find another one before the body is cold. If

someone criticizes your behavior, you should be able to kill them, no questions asked."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The Noctis." She said. "Believe in a more rigid, controlled approach. They value society, culture, history, and art. They see the Hellraisers attitude as being barbaric and primitive. And I suppose it is. It is a relic of the Age of Chaos, after all."

Lauren wanted to ask more questions, but another girl was coming up behind her.

"Ooooh, I'm sorry." Samaiya said immediately. "I would love to keep talking to you about this, but I need to get back to work… Say, why don't you come to a Student Council meeting, if you get the chance? We're always looking for the chance for human input on going ons at the University…" She gave a small smile, and wave. "It was nice meeting you!" She chirped. And then she and her friend were gone, to speak to the other girl at the foot of the stairs.

Lauren watched them, her heart thumping in her chest. That was her first proper conversation with a vampire. She didn't seem so bad. She seemed perfectly friendly, if a little off putting. She didn't feel as if they had become friends, as she had with Ophelia, but it was still a perfectly normal, ordinary conversation between two adults.

More vampires were lurking around the entrance hall to the building. Unlike the history one, which seemed to have a healthy variety of races lurking about, nearly everyone she saw was a vampire. They tended, she noticed, to look up at her as she passed by, before returning to whatever it was that they were doing. It unnerved her. She felt almost like a piece of meat. She was thankful that, at the very least, Samaiya had not been like that.

She came to a stop outside the classroom, take a deep breath, and walked in. There was already a girl with long, black hair sitting at a desk, seemingly doodling on a pad. Lauren barely had time to recognize her as Clair Luxiana before a glowing white figure

descended upon her. This time it was a woman. A tall one, with glowing pale skin and long pointed ears. Her features were otherworldly beautiful, with not a single flaw to speak of.

"Greetings." The professor said, staring down at her. Lauren gulped, and took two steps back. The other woman was so tall, that Lauren found herself feeling a little intimidated by her.

"I am Professor Galandra of the Fair Folk." She said. Her hair, like Samaiya's had been, was almost completely white. It was cut fairly short, but still looked very feminine. "I take it that you are one of my new students?"

"I… I think so." Lauren stammered nervously. Galandra tut-tutted.

"You think so?" She repeated. "Then why are you here then?"

Lauren stared down at the floor. She could feel her heart sinking in her chest. Galandra sighed and shook her head.

"Take your seat." She said. "I took the liberty of assigning seats and setting up magical barriers between them. No person other than the assigned can take their seat. Don't you dare try talking in class, because I will hear every word."

Lauren found herself seizing up as she slowly made her way past her, to the seat with her name printed in beautiful handwriting on it. She sat down, hanging her head low. She stared at the wooden desk, her mind whirling with memories of past trauma. She had had these kinds of teachers before.

She sat staring at the table as the rest of the class came ambling in. Lauren wasn't paying as much attention this time. The sound of relaxed, girlish gossip surrounded her from all sides, but she hardly registered it. She was too consumed by the nasty feeling that something was about to go horribly wrong.

Galandra strode up to the front of the class, her heels clicking against the floor, as she turned around to face them.

"Greetings." She said. "Welcome to your Occult Literature Class. I, Galandra of the Fair Folk, will be your instructor to help guide you

through the…’ She coughed. “Very best literature that mere mortals have ever produced.”

Lauren looked around at the class around her. Most of the people surrounding her were girls. All were staring intently at Galandra, giving her their utmost attention. Lauren felt very much out of place. Class had not even truly begun and she was already distracted.

“This will be, of course, the first time you ever encountered many of these works.” She said. “Many of these texts date back hundreds, if not thousands of years. It will be almost impossible for any of you to cover all of them… but merely scratching the surface of the arcane makes you wiser than most. For that, you should be commended.”

Her sharp eyes glanced around the room.

“However, one must continue reading and acquiring knowledge… long after you leave my classroom for good.” She good. “Only a fool considers himself wise.”

Lauren found herself taken aback at how confident and impressive she looked. Her glowing white skin seemed to almost radiate a powerful energy that swept across the entire room.

“You will primarily be studying works from both the Hellraiser and Noctis.” Galandra said. “I would prefer, of course, that you study the works of my people, but I feel that we must start with simple material. Now, does everyone have their copy of the assigned book?”

The class seemed to nod in unison. Lauren did not move. However Galandra’s head immediately shot right towards her.

“You do have your book?” She asked sharply. Lauren almost fell out of her chair.

“Yes… yes!” She almost shouted. She had been so startled that it had caused her voice to raise to a higher pitch. There were a couple of giggles around the class.

“Enough of that.” Galandra said sharply, and the class fell silent. “I would ask you, Lauren Frey, to answer when I ask you a question.”

But she hadn't asked her a question. Lauren thought faintly. She had asked the class as a whole. Surely not responding at all simply meant that there was nothing wrong, that she had her book? She felt a crushing sense of despair fall all over her. She wanted nothing more than to get away, and to never come back.

She felt herself lower in her chair as Galandra continued her speech.

"*Hell and Black Skies,* I feel, is an excellent collection of writings." Galandra continued. "It adequately demonstrates that all mortals, regardless of their education, status in society, or religion… are doomed to hopeless failure. It shows us, the critical reader, lives and worlds outside our your own. No matter how strange or different they may be…"

She held out a hand, and a flash of light filled the room, emanating a soft, brilliant light. For several seconds the light shone, but over a period of about half a minute the light slowly began to fade. When it was nothing more than a speck, she snapped her fist shut.

"They all end in the same way." She finished. "As a mortal, the inevitability of death defines your very existence. As such, it is very difficult for your art and philosophy to get away from this reality. You have no real time to ponder this world, or yourself. You, on a primal level, know that it will all someday come to an end."

Lauren sat, following along as best as she was able.

"Therefore, it is fundamentally impossible for you to deal with any topic other than Death." She went on. "Your politics, your daily lives, the worst moment of your lives… It seems to follow you, like a vulture above. You cannot escape it, you cannot run from it. It defines your existence."

"Now." Galandra said. "This is a fifteen week course. I expect you to thoroughly read through all assigned reading material, regardless of whether or not you intend to cover it in your midterm or final papers. We will be discussing every story in class, and I expect all of you to participate."

Lauren felt her heart sink. Reading the story would not be a problem… but discussing it in class, in front of all of these people, was something else entirely. She could feel her hand start to tremble. Next week… she would need to speak.

Galandra raised her finger, and a stack of papers on her desk slow rose into the air and began setting themselves down, one sheet at a time, on each desk.

"This is your reading schedule." She said. "You will be expected to have your reading done on that particular day." Lauren immediately gave her schedule a once over and checked her book. Her first assigned story was called *Lonely Nights.* She marked it with a bookmark.

"These stories." Galandra continued. "Range from a wide range of sources. From those who have observed the Rituals of Bald Mountain to historical fiction based on battles between knights of the Order of the Dragon. You will be exposed to ideas and worldviews far outside the realms of your comprehension. I ask you not to feel intimidated by this endless ocean of knowledge… but to dive right in."

Her eyes flashed.

"Am I clear?"

The class nodded. No one, Lauren felt, was willing to challenge her.

"Now." She said. "Perhaps we should go over the general time period in which this collection was put together.

And she was off. *Hell and Black Skies*, she explained, was specifically put together to emphasize the numerous ways in which Hellraiser and Noctis culture affected individuals, on a personal, cultural, and religious level.

"For a mortal, Witches almost seem indistinguishable from one another" She explained. "There are as many kinds of demons as there are stars in the sky… and any one of them can forge a contract with a mortal…. If one feels so inclined."

Claire Luxiana looked up. She raised her hand, but Galandra ignored her.

"Understanding the intricacies of Hellraiser and Noctis history and culture." She said. "Will do much to help you identify those who align with those beliefs."

"I don't particularly want to identify with a Noctis." Someone said, loudly.

Galandra glared up, right at Lauren. Lauren froze in shock. She was looking right past her, but her gaze was so rock hard and icy Lauren felt she her entire body might freeze over.

"Boy." She said. "Do you want to burn too?"

Lauren didn't turn around to look at him: she had no idea who was speaking. But he laughed.

"No, no." He said. "I was simply making an observation."

"Your observation has no value." She snapped.

She stared icily at him. Lauren could hear him humming behind her. He seemed more amused by her outbursts than anything, but he said nothing more.

Galandra gave him one last glare and then turned back to the rest of the class and continued with her speech. "It is important to understand the thinking and history of other cultures, not just your own." She said. This will give you insight and appreciation for your own history and culture. In a way studying literature from those with different views than you will be in and of itself an enlightening experience."

No other student seemed willing to interrupt her during her lecture. Lauren was very thankful. She had been greatly unnerved by those hawklike eyes every time they focused in on her… even now, she felt that occasionally their eyes met. She was sure that Galandra had far better eyesight than normal people.

She was relieved when class finally ended. She gathered up her things and stood up.

“And remember.” Galandra called out. “The reading NEEDS to be done.” There was a brief murmur of assent from the class as they headed for the door, Lauren among them.

She was surprised to find herself standing right behind Claire Luxiana.

“Ah.” Claire said, looking down at her with interest. “It’s you.” She sounded almost bored.

“Y-yeah…”

Claire looked back up nonchalantly. “I wish our instructor was a witch.” She said. “I doubt an Elf is going to be willing to teach us much.”

She spoke so casually and so matter of factly that Lauren didn’t quite register that it must have been very offensive. If Galandra had not looked up to glare at them Lauren would possibly haven’t thought anything of the comment.

“Who is she?” Lauren whispered. “Galandra, I mean.” She had feared that asking ‘What is she’ would have been rude.

Claire didn’t answer right away. She looked very thoughtful.

“A warrior of some renown, I believe.” She said. “She has killed many witches.” She toyed with her necklace. Lauren shuddered as the things she thought were teeth clattered together. “But other than that my knowledge is limited. Elves are a very elusive people.”

They stepped out of the class, and Lauren stepped away from her, thinking that the conversation was over. To her very great surprise, however, Claire followed her.

“You have an interest in the occult as well, I see.”

Lauren turned to look at her. “What in the world gave you that idea?” She asked, surprised.

“You’re taking an occult literature class.”

Lauren blushed furiously, turning away from her. “I… I picked my classes at random….” She admitted. “There’s nothing more to it than

that, really."

"Is that so?" Claire didn't sound as if she believed her. Nevertheless she continued. "Please know that your sister is here for you… if you ever do decide to become a witch." And with that, she turned and with a swish of her cloak, was gone. Vanished, into thin air.

Lauren stared at where Claire had just been, contemplating. Once more she found herself uneasy. Claire, for whatever reason, had seemed to take an interest in her. Her behavior, her mannerisms, her way of speaking all pointed to her being an exceedingly odd individual. Certainly not someone that Lauren would want to be around. She was beginning to feel that she had made the right call in not associating with her at the orientation meeting. Perhaps some witches had earned their reputation. She wished she had someone she could talk to about this.

Her thoughts roamed back to Galandra, and the lecture she had just sat through. She had been very clear that *To Hell and Black Skies* was meant to teach students about cultures other than their own. She wondered whether there were any stories regarding witches in there.

She pulled out the book and examined it. It was a giant book, and she had difficulty propping it open while on the move. She moved to a nearby wall, pushed herself up against it, and slid into a sitting position, book on her knees. The cover stared at her intimidatingly. She flipped it open and began perusing it.

She had already bookmarked the required reading for next week *Lonely Nights.* It was a story about a girl balancing her personal life with being a werewolf.

This sounded interesting. Lauren realized, as her eyes ran over the page. She had met a werewolf just before orientation. Emilia Fenrir. Lauren wondered what she was doing now. She had been such a loud, confident, strong willed girl. Her complete opposite.

But she wasn't here to learn about wolves. She wanted material about witches. She flipped through the pages. *The Genie of the*

Ring, King for a Day, The Great Old Ones, Amaris Yew, and *Kingdom Of The Once And Future King.*

None of them had anything to do with witches. Genies, Kings, ancient gods, and vampires. But no witches. She was just about to give up and shut the book when her eye fell on a new title. *The Good Witch.*

She excitedly turned the page, and read the blurb.

The Good Witch is a beloved classic among the Noctis. The story depicts a beautiful girl discovering witchcraft and using her powers to help the people around her. The story is well regarded for espousing primary Noctis values, such as a respect for the natural environment of the Planet, and a respect for human culture and traditions. The story was a known favorite of Amaris Yew, who often praised the story for its depiction of the struggles of Young Witches, and how they must not grow to resent humanity.

A classic among Witches, huh? It made her think of how her teachers had praised the works of Shakespeare, and how much she had enjoyed reading them. The characters of Shakespeare were fascinating, compelling creations that endured generations of people. The Good Witch, she was sure, was of the same mold.

She was very excited about reading it now. She flipped the page to the story itself, excited to lose herself in the story.

"Hey."

She froze, her heart jolting in her chest. In her enthusiasm she had not been paying attention to her surroundings. There was someone sitting right next to her.

"Did I scare you?" The girl asked, laughing, as she raised a hand and stroked Lauren's hair with her finger. "Don't be frightened."

Lauren recoiled. She was close… far too close. Her head was positioned so close they were almost touching. How had she not noticed her? She was so panicked that she couldn't move. She froze up, unmoving.

“A quiet one.” The girl murmured, still stroking, as she stared unblinkingly at Lauren’s face. She could feel those wide, round eyes never leaving her. Lauren gripped her book.

The girl smiled. Lauren felt a sudden jolt of fear. But she couldn’t move. The girl leaned in close, her lips nearly touching Lauren’s neck-

BANG

Lauren screamed as blood spurted out over the stone floor. The girl’s head jerked away from her, slamming into the wall and down again. Lauren watched, terrified, as her eyes opened, blazing with an intense fire.

She bared her fangs and hissed, leaping to her feet.

“Go on, get.” A man’s voice said angrily, and another gunshot rang out. The girl was again slammed with a bullet, staggering in place somewhat. It cast one last, longing look at Lauren before turning and scampering off.

“Damn Vampire.” The man said, scowling, as he made his way over to Lauren. “Hey, kid. You alright? She didn’t leave a bite or anything, did she?”

Lauren was in shock. Her eyes couldn’t leave the bloodied floor. The man bent down, eye level, and raised a finger in front of her face.

“Focus on the finger.” He said, his voice calm and relaxing. “And try to count to twenty.”

She started, surprised somewhat, as the finger began to move in front of her face. She began mouthing the numbers aloud, and by the time she reached twenty she felt somewhat calmer.

“There you go.” The man said. “Now that’s better, isn’t it?”

“Wh-what happened?” Lauren asked, shaking a little.

“Vampire got a little too close.” He said. “She probably used Hypnosis… I could tell you wanted to get away, but couldn’t.”

She took him in the first time. She had to stop herself from gasping.

This guy looked like a fourteen year old boy's idea of cool. A beautiful red leather jacket covered up his powerful looking body. The still smoking handgun in his right hand was engraved with elaborate symbols and signs that she could not decipher. He was older than her, perhaps in his early twenties, but looked and acted like someone much older.

"Who… who are you?" Lauren whispered, a little nervously. He smiled at her, and she noted faintly that it was a very pretty smile.

"Rondo." He said. "I'm a Vampire Hunter." He moved and sat down next to her. She felt herself recoil slightly, again… his thick, sturdy boots had settled on the blood that the vampire had spilled onto the floor, and the gun that had done the job was still in his hand.

"V-vampire Hunter?"

He lit up a cigar. "Yeah." He said. "It's my job to make sure that pretty little girls like you don't become lunch to any of these… uh, lovely young ladies of the night."

"Vampires aren't supposed to attack humans." Lauren said immediately. Rondo laughed.

"Yeah, not supposed to is right. Doesn't stop them from trying, though. Especially if you have a desirable blood type." He said. "Have you gotten tested?"

"Have I what?"

"Gotten your blood type tested." He repeated.

"Why…. Why should I do that?"

"It's a good way to see if you're at risk for vampire attacks or not." He said. "The bigger of a delicacy your blood is, the more at risk you are to be jumped. Going by what just happened, I would probably get tested. And invest in some protection."

He frowned.

"I can't believe a girl would wander around with nothing on her…"

Lauren stared down at her shoes. She felt that she might die from embarrassment.

"Tell you what." Rondo said. "I'll walk you home. She jolted, a little afraid as he gently took her arm and pulled her to her feet. He was gigantic. She thought faintly, looking up at him.

"You feeling okay?" He asked her. "You can grab onto my jacket, if you want."

He released her arm and turned around, gesturing for her. She stared at him for a moment, before reaching forward and lightly gripping the fabric.

"You won't damage it." He said. "It's enchanted… it's pretty much indestructible. Get behind me if something happens, okay?" And then he strode off. His steps were so wide and so quick that she had to struggle to keep up.

The Vampires in the main hall had a very different attitude than they did when she had first walked through. They bared their teeth and grimaced as they passed by. Rondo, spinning his gun on his finger, met eyes with each and every one.

"Damn bloodsuckers." He said. "I'd kill 'em all if I could."

Lauren said nothing. She bent her head downward, unable to take the negative attention from those around her.

He turned back to look at her.

"You're not scared of them, are you?" He asked. "Don't be. As long as you know how to protect yourself, you'll never be in any real danger."

Lauren looked up at him.

"But I don't know-" She began.

He stopped in his tracks, in the middle of the hall, and turned around. She had to stop herself from running into him. He turned around to face her and bent down to meet her eyes.

“Then you should learn.” He said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. His eyes were so pretty. Lauren thought, unable to form her thoughts into words. She could stare int them for hours.

A vampire let out a derisive snort. Rondo raised his hand and fired off a shot. The Vampire ducked as the bullet slammed into the stone statue just behind her, shattering its arm into pieces.

“You bastard!” The Vampire snarled, whirling on them, fangs bared. But Rondo had already taken Lauren’s hand and led her away.

“They’re pretty skittish creatures.” Rondo was telling her, as they stepped out of the building, back near the park entrance. “One good scare is more than enough if they’re getting a little bit too interested. Which way are we going, kid?”

“I, uh, came through the park…?” Lauren said, pointing. She winced as Rondo whirled on her.

“Seriously?” He asked, a little sharply. Lauren was unable to meet his eyes as she gave a small nod.

“You don’t go through the park.” He said. “It’s Vampire territory… in these school buildings they’ll try and restrain themselves, but out in the open….”

“I saw a couple of them.” Lauren recalled. “They looked my way, but they didn’t…”

“Vampires tend to stalk their victims for long periods of time. You may be being followed.” Rondo said immediately. “How long ago was this?”

“Uh, about two hours…?”

Rondo nodded.

“Alright.” He said. “I’ll walk you through the park. If you see anything following us, tell me and I’ll try to scare it off. You don’t want her knowing where you live. If you do, she’ll try coming up with all sorts of excuses to knock on your door and ask to be let inside.”

“O-okay…”

Rondo smiled.

“You’re a freshman, yeah?” He asked. “You look kind of nervous.”

‘I… I am.”

They took off again into the park. Lauren’s heart was beating quickly in her chest, but not because of her fears of being attacked. This was the first walk she had ever taken with a man in her life, and the conversation had suddenly become very personal.

“Why did you decide to come to Grey Arcadia?” He asked. “Normal girls just want to go and party… and that isn’t really a thing here.”

“It was the only place I was accepted.” Lauren said, softly, as their feet hit the park trail. “No one else would have me…

Rondo let out a irritate ‘tch’ with his teeth. Lauren looked at him, alarmed, worried that she had already made a bad impression.

“This school.” He said, sounding very disgusted. “Loves taking advantage of people. People like you are granted admission to provide vampires with blood… or witches with new followers. Don’t think that being granted admission here was a good thing.”

Lauren stared at him, taken aback.

“Is that really true?” She asked. “I had no idea…”

“It is.” He told her. “Humans have always been invited under false pretenses here… this University was founded by Vampires, after all.” They passed by the statue of Amaris Yew, and he turned his head and spit at it.

“Who was she?” Lauren asked, gesturing up to the statue. Rondo rubbed his face and turned to look.

“A Vampire Noble who helped build the University.” He said. “This park was built to commemorate her. get used to seeing her face, because she’s everywhere...”

To Lauren’s alarm he raised the gun again and fired off a shot. The bullet soared forward and hit the statue right in the forehead.

However unlike the last time he had done this, the bullet simply bounced off.

“Someone must have gotten tired of all the vandalism.” Rondo murmured, as he holstered the weapon. “She’s not very popular these days, even among the Noctis. But the University wants to keep her statues and buildings around.”

They turned away, and walked back down the path.

“Did you mean what you said before?” Lauren asked him. “About the University, and human students?”

“Every word.” Rondo told her. “Did you really not know?”

“No…” Lauren shook her head. “I didn’t!”

“Hm.” He looked contemplative. “It’s not exactly a secret.” He looked at her. “Do you know any other human students?”

She thought of Li Zhou, Zane, and the others she had seen at the orientation. “Yes.” She said.

“Keep them close.” Rondo advised. “If anything happens to you, they’ll be the only ones who will notice, or care.”

A black shape was hanging from a tree. It took Lauren a moment to realize that it was a vampire, hanging upside down by her legs. She seemed to be asleep.

“Vampires don’t need to sleep.” Rondo said. “But they’ll take naps to stave off their hunger. Part of the reason this place is so dangerous is that if they wake up suddenly, they may show their true colors. If a vampire is nice to you it’s always a farce. Remember that.”

“You know a lot about vampires.” Lauren said, nervously glancing at the girl. She shifted about from her perch, yawned, and ruffled her coat.

“Yeah, well, I hunt them for a living.” He said. “You pick up a thing or two, being around them so much.”

“Is it…” She hesitated, how best to phrase her question. “Do you like it?”

“Like it?” He cast her a wayward glance. “This is my life.”

Lauren was confused. She felt it was kind of a non answer, that he had not told her exactly how he felt. All the ways she had hoped the conversation would go, that he would open up to her and tell her about his life, his adventures, his family, now felt like they were out of her reach. She wasn’t sure what to say.

They reached the end of the park and stopped. They watched as a police dog walked by, its paws padding along the sidewalk.

“Hey officer!” Rondo called. “How are things looking?”

The dog stopped, and turned to look at them. It was a Borzoi, with pure white fur and an especially large muzzle.

“Ah, Hunter.” He said. “Things are looking good today. There have been no incidents.”

“Well, I found one.” He said. He placed a hand on Lauren’s shoulder. “She almost got attacked by a vampire.”

The dog suddenly looked more alert. It came over to them, and stood up on its hind legs. Lauren flinched as it leaned forward and sniffed her neck.

“I see.” He said, as he lowered himself back to the ground. “Well, it’s lucky you were there, Hunter Rondo. I take it that you’re walking her home?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will try and locate the vampire.” He said. “Please excuse me.”

The dog rushed past them, into the park. Lauren turned and stared as the dog bounded across the park at a frightening speed.

“You like dogs?” Rondo said, amused.

“Yes, of course.” Lauren said. “Although I’m not used to them talking…”

“You can raise animals to speak and act like humans.” He said. “Dogs are better suited to dealing with supernatural threats than

humans, so the university uses them to sniff out trouble."

"Then that what do you do?"

"Me?" He asked. "There are some things that only a man can do."

He smiled at her. "Do you know how to contact the police?"

"Uh…. Call 9-1-1?"

"That's the last thing you want to do." He said immediately. "Normal people aren't trained to deal with the nonsense that goes on here… No, just whistle. A dog should come running. They should be able to scare off most things."

Lauren didn't know how to whistle. She stood there awkwardly, wondering how to bring up this problem to Rondo as they walked along the street. Lauren was quick to notice that passerby were giving them a wide berth. Rondo spun his gun on his finger rather like a cowboy, staring around at the street with interest.

"Where are you living?" He asked. "How much further?"

"Uh, here."

They came to a stop right outside the music hall. Lauren stepped up the stairs and turned around.

"Thank you for walking me back." She said, bowing to him formally. "I really appreciate it."

He wasn't looking at her. He was staring up at the building, frowning.

"Here?" He asked. "Really?"

"Is something the matter?"

He looked at her. His gaze suddenly seemed somewhat less friendly.

"Who are you?" He asked. She stared at him. She was very much taken aback by his cold tone: She had no idea how to answer him.

"Answer me!"

He raised the gun, and pointed it at her. She felt her heart stop.

"I'm… I'm Lauren Frey." She said. "I… I clean floors."

It was ridiculous, but it was all she could think of to say. Rondo stood there, gun pointed straight at her forehead, for several seconds. Lauren felt her heart beating in her chest. And then, finally, he pulled away, and holstered the weapon.

"I see." He said. "Well, you'll be safe from vampires here, at any rate." He sounded almost disparaging. Without another word he turned and walked away.

Lauren watched him go. She felt her heart seizing up in her chest. She took a step down the stairs and shouted out.

"W-wait!"

He turned around. He seemed to be glaring at her. Lauren felt her throat run dry.

"I… wanted to thank you for everything." She said. "I… I don't know what I would have done without you. Thank you."

They stared at each other for a moment. Lauren for a moment felt as if he would again whip out his gun and shoot her dead. But again he let out a sigh, and then smiled.

"No problem." He said. "Anytime." He gestured to the building behind her. He turned back around and walked away.

Lauren stared after him, her heart beating wildly in his chest. It was not long until he disappeared amongst the crowd of people. She stood for a while, staring out into the crowd. She felt completely overwhelmed by what had just happened. She had no idea how to sort out the myriad of feelings and emotions she had felt over the past twenty minutes.

"Oi, girly! You gonna move or what?"

She jumped. She stared down guiltily at a satyr, a male one this time, glaring up at her with an evil eye. He was, like most of his kind, completely shirtless. But whereas most of his kind would wear some kind of cloth around the pelvic area, he was completely naked, save for the goat like fur that ran up and down his legs.

“Oh!” Lauren said, too shocked to speak. The satyr had a giant instrument wrapped around his waist. She stepped aside as the Satyr walked up to the front door and kicked it open with his hoofed foot.

“Go to Hell you son of a bitch!” The Satyr screamed, as he placed his mouth on the instrument and blew. Despite the harshness of his words, the music that erupted was soft, elegant, and playful.

The sound, however wonderful it was on its own, contrasted badly with The Master’s gorgeous version of Night on Bald Mountain, which was one of the Master’s favorite pieces. The people sitting in the hall turned to look.

Lauren could feel a sharp, intense pain in her head. She could feel The Master’s anger. She stepped forward and laid a hand on the Satyr’s shoulder.

“You must leave.” She commanded, her voice low and dark. “You are not wanted-“

She gasped as the Satyr kicked out a hoof at her leg. It was a powerful kick, not unlike that of a horse. She buckled, crying out in pain, to the ground. It hadn’t been a direct hit, otherwise it would have snapped her leg in two. But she was still in agonizing pain.

She felt The Master’s anger again. Still clutching her leg, she glared up at the Satyr still playing his instrument blissfully, seemingly trying his best to drown out the music from the organ. He was, Lauren was sure, an excellent player, but this was not his stage. He stepped forward, among the crowd, dancing about, blowing into their ears. The startled people backed away. Many of them making their way to the door.

Lauren grimaced as they approached. She felt a desire to try and stop them, but did nothing as they stepped past her and through the open doors. Only one of the guests stopped to help her.

“Are you alright?”

A bald man was reaching his hand down to her. She absentmindedly reached out and took it.

“Thank you…” Lauren whispered, as she was pulled to her feet. It was a little difficult staying steady, as her knee still hurt, so she swayed a little bit before getting her bearings.

“Oh… it’s you.” She said, surprised. It was Brother Tinley… the Monk who had taken orientation with her. He nodded at her and smiled.

“Yes.” He said. “I remember you, Lauren Frey.” The music behind them was getting ever louder. “Are you well? Can you walk?”

“Well…” Lauren said, a little shyly. “I need to help….”

“I see.” The Monk said, as he gave her arm a little pat. “Wait here.” He released her and turned around. She winced, bending over somewhat to lessen the pain in her leg as he walked over to the Satyr.

He hadn’t seemed to have noticed them: He was still playing his soft, elegant tune, but he was stomping his hooves against the floor like a madman. He seemed to want to cause as much noise as physically possible. Tinley came up from behind him, and in on fluid motion wrapped a single hand around his neck.

The music vanished as the Satyr gasped. The instrument fell from his lips as the Night on Bald Mountain hit their ears, completely uninterrupted. Lauren felt the Master’s pleasure.

The instrument dropped to the Satyr’s side as he flailed about, kicking and shouting, as Tinley dragged him backward.

“What are you doing?” The Satyr snapped. ”You have no right!” He struggled as Tinley dragged him to the door.

Tinley said nothing to him as he pushed him out the door. The satyr whirled around, bringing the instrument back up to his lips as Tinley shut the door in his face. He turned back to Lauren and smiled.

“The Master thanks you.” Lauren said formally, bowing, as he approached her. The Master, seeming to have reached finished playing Night on Bald Mountain, had moved on to playing another piece. This one much gentler and upbeat.

“Think nothing of it.” Tinley said. “My , my, Lauren. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Ohhh…” Lauren flushed, averting her eyes from his. “Why… why are you here?”

“I’ve been doing a little sightseeing since I arrived.” Tinley said. “It was only a matter of time until I found myself at the Hall of Music. The Music is as wonderful as I was told.” Words sprang into Lauren’s mouth before she knew what she was saying.

“The Master thanks you.” Lauren said, immediately. Tinley smiled.

“I see that you’re settling into Grey Arcadia well.” He said. “That’s good. I was very worried. Most don’t last very long here, I’m afraid…”

He was a student, but he spoke as if he was a lot older, and a lot wiser. Lauren found herself wanting to ask him more questions.

“What happens to them?”

His smile faded. “They die.” He said simply. “Surely you have seen what everyday life here is like?”

Lauren thought back to Galandra, who had set up barriers in her classroom to prevent fights from breaking out. She thought of Rondo, and how he had shot a vampire to save her. She thought of the things they discussed in orientation, and how much of a focus Alisa had put on safety.

“Everyday is the same?” She asked, in a whisper. She felt her heart filling up with a sense of dread: How many times had she come close to death?

“Every day.” He told her. “You must accept this.”

Lauren nodded. Her heart, once again, felt like it was going to burst out of her chest.

“It was a pleasure seeing you.” Tinley said. “I will be sure to check up on you as often as I am able…”

“I… thank you.” Lauren said. “But must you go so soon?”

Tinley smiled.

“I’m sure we will see each other again.” He said. He bowed to her. “Please, take care of yourself.”

“You too…”

He turned and stepped out of the hall. Lauren watched him go, a little bit anxiously, before turning back to the Master.

(You did well.) The Master commended her, as she began cleaning up the mess that the satyr had made during his rampage. (Be sure to make That One feel welcome)

“May I invite him for tea, Master?” She asked. The thought had crossed her mind during their conversation, but she had not wanted to invite him without consulting the Master.

(You may.) He said. (In fact I insist that you do.)

Guests began to filter back in as she worked to clean up the mess that the satyrs had made. It seemed that word of the satyr’s attack had spread because a police dog arrived at the door and asked for her statement.

It was a particularly friendly golden retriever that allowed Lauren to stroke its head as it questioned her.

“I think that will be all.” The dog said finally, after about ten minutes. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

“I still don’t understand why a satyr came in here.” Lauren said anxiously.

“There could be any number of reasons.” The dog said. “Did you personally offend a satyr?”

“Well… no.” She said, anxiously. “Not to my knowledge. There are a couple in my Historia class, but this wasn’t one of them.”

“And what about your Master?”

The Master spoke to her, and she relayed the answer to the dog's question.

"Satyr fundamentalists believe that music is inherently a celebration of nature, or of their patron god Pan. As a result of this, the idea of elaborate concerts being put on in a stone environment like this, to them, is intolerable."

"I see." The dog said, nodding. "Yes, we've certainly been having problems with Olympian fundamentalists as of late… have you observed any other problems?"

The Master said he had not, and Lauren was quick to agree.

"Very well then." The dog said, as it got up from a sitting position. "I think that will be all. Take care, now."

"You too, officer." Lauren said. The dog gave her hand an affectionate rub with its nose, and then took off into the street.

That was the second police dog she had to interact with today. She thought faintly, as she stepped back into the hall. Tinley was right… Grey Arcadia was dangerous.

With her work completed, Lauren found herself having dinner. It took her a while to remember the book sitting unread in her bag. She shuddered a little: she wasn't entirely sure whether or not the pages had been splattered with vampire blood.

She became so paranoid that she had to leave her half eaten meal and check. To her very great relief the book was still brand new. She took the book, and flipped it open to where she had left off. *The Good Witch.*

She had read the excerpt already, and so continued onward to the actual story.

My story is not one that may be much of interest. My life was surprisingly mundane, for a servant of darkness. My work consisted of very little other than trying to ease the suffering of those around me. My Master, I am sure, will likely forget my name very soon after I pass on. But still, I have no regrets.

Chapter 6

She read until very early in the morning. *The Good Witch* proved itself to be a very engaging, if somewhat brief, read. The Witch, who throughout the story never gave her name, went through every aspect of her life for a witch. How she, as a child, escaped a life of poverty and abuse from her family by learning magic and becoming a witch. She described, in intricate detail, how she signed her life away to eternally serve her Master, bonding with him body and soul.

The story was very specific about how this worked: Witches, in order to reach a higher pedigree of magic than ordinary humans, would form 'contracts' with powerful demons. These demons would bestow them incredible powers and completely change their bodies, in exchange for eternal devotion and service. The Witch in the story received pure white wings on her back, rather like an angel.

These little nuggets of information fascinated her. The witches she had seen around town, such as that librarian Spinnet, had all formed contracts with different demons. As a result all of them looked radically different from one another. It made her wonder what Ophelia had been… She had not said.

Lauren found herself paying more attention to the little details like that rather than the story itself. By the time she had finished, she felt very satisfied with it, yet also felt that she had somehow missed out on the meat of the story. It had been oddly inspirational to her.

Now that she had read one story, though, she was ready for more. She tore through her assigned reading for that week, *Lonely Nights.* It was a much more thrilling read than *The Good Witch* had been. The protagonist, Julia, underwent a brutal werewolf transformation every night. The story was about the emotional struggle of restraining herself from attacking and killing the man she loved. Lauren found herself crying at the end: Julia's love, at first so reluctant to accept her for who she was, eventually chose to stay with her. Lauren wished she could meet someone like that.

Lauren checked the reading schedule. Next week's story, *Amaris Yew,* was about a vampire. She had had enough of them over the

past couple of days and decided to skip it. She chose a story at random this time. This one, to her delight, was about another witch. *The Creation of Life.*

She read the excerpt with enthusiasm:

Alchemy has traditionally been used as a method to create an elixir of immortality or limitless wealth. In practice, however, it has developed into an elaborate magical art that can create anything. Even life. Although resurrecting the dead seems to be impossible, creating artificial life through alchemy led to the modern day process of artificially constructing life.

So the story was about… building living beings? Lauren was intrigued. She began the story, and found herself put off by the far darker tone. It was about an Alchemist and his quest to create the elixir of life. Alchemy involved breaking down materials to their base elements in order to convert them into other elements, and then build those up into different materials. In order to create the elixir of life, the Alchemist felt it would be practical to try and bring life back to a corpse.

By the time a lifeless hand grabbed the doctor as he worked, Lauren knew that she would be having nightmares. She shut the book with a snap and leaned back in her seat. The Master's music was relaxing and gentle, almost like a lullaby. It made her feel less alone, and actually did quite a lot to lull her into sleep.

She woke up the next day, not even giving the accursed book a second glance. She took a shower, got dressed, and prepared for her third class… Introduction to Political Evils. She gathered her things and stepped out.

This class was thankfully, later in the day. Although she had overslept a little, she was able to go about her regular duties as usual, and then see herself out.

The streets were more crowded than they had been the past two days. She grimaced a little as she stood at the top of the stairs, staring down at the mess of people moving every which way.

Could they really be thought of as people, though? Lauren thought, as something that she would describe as a giant fishman walked past. There were very few things in front of her that she would even describe as humanoid. Even witches, she now knew, could not really be considered human.

Her Intro to Political Evils class was in the same building as her Historia one. She found herself taking the same route she had two days before, narrowly avoiding the crowds of witches and animals on the streets. After all that had happened the day before, she half expected something to happen on the way there.

But nothing did. She was ignored the entire way there, a fact for which she was eternally grateful. It was beginning to dawn on her that perhaps it hadn't been a good idea to get lost in a book while surrounded by vampires. She elected that, in the future, she should probably limit her studying to her room.

If anything, she was a little surprised when she stepped into the History building and found herself feeling somewhat more comfortable than she had in the Literature building. It took her a moment to try and figure out why.

There were a lot more people about. People who seemed, at the very least, somewhat ordinary. The Literature Building, in comparison, had been infested with vampires. She hadn't seen a single normal person until she had entered the classroom. And even then it had been full of witches.

She wondered why that was.

The realization inspired her to pay a bit more attention to her surroundings. The History Building, she noticed, was a lot more well lit than the literature one. There were less gothic statues and paintings, and more beautiful stained glass windows.

The Intro To Political Evils Class was on a lower floor. She made her way past the crowd of people lingering around the hall and entered the classroom.

"Ah…"

A ghost glided over to her. Lauren froze, staring up at the silver white creature.

She had seen ghosts before. Never on the street, but often in buildings and stores around Grey Arcadia. They had never spoken to her, or bothered her in any way, but something about them kind of unnerved her. Unlike Vampires or witches, she wasn't exactly sure what a ghost could do to hurt you. And that had made them scary to her.

"Ahhh…." The ghost said. "Name?"

"Lauren Frey…"

"Lauren Frey…" The ghost said, as its eyes moved down to a clipboard in its hands. "Unaffiliated?"

"I'm sorry?"

It looked up at her again.

"Your alignment affiliation." It said. "You are neither Noctis, or Hellraiser?"

Lauren felt very stupid. "No, no."

"You are human?"

"Yes."

"I see." The ghost said. To her shock, the face of the ghost began to twist and write. Its face seemed to twist and turn among itself, changing its shape entirely. She froze in place, certain that she was about to be attacked in some way.

The ghost went from being an older figure of ambiguous gender to a beautiful, black haired woman. With burning eyes and a bright smile.

"A pleasure to meet you." The ghost said, brightly. "I am Yin. I will be your Professor for this class. I will be arguing for the Noctis."

The face began to contort and change again. Lauren again felt her body seize up as the hair of the ghost began to recede back into its head, its facial features becoming more masculine, and its frame being larger and more muscular.

“And I.” The ghost said, now clearly male. “Am Yang. I will be your Professor as well, arguing for the Hellraisers.”

Lauren stared. The ghost laughed, and placed a hand on her hand. He patted her, rather like a dog.

“Is something the matter?” He asked.

“I…” Lauren thought it would be very rude to ask just what was going on here, but she had to do it. “Who are you, exactly?”

Yang drew himself up to his full height.

“A spirit.” He said. “A physical representation of the political discord between the Hellraiser and the Noctis. Yang…”

In a flash the woman, Yin, was in his place.

“And Yin.” She said, smiling. “Don’t look so shocked, darling. Have you never seen a spirit before?”

“No… never!”

“Well, you’ve learned something new already.” Yin said, brightly. “Why don’t you have a seat? Please don’t be afraid… I won’t allow anything to happen to you in my class.”

As she turned to go, she had the Male Professor’s voice ring out behind her. “No promises here.” The voice was almost leering. She felt herself shiver.

She sat down, as far away from those already seated as possible, and bent her head. She wasn’t sure what to expect. There were no force fields or barriers this time: Galandra, although very strict, had made her feel much more secure in her class than Historia had. As more and more people began to filter in, many of them she knew to be dangerous, she felt more and more nervous.

“Oh!”

Lauren looked up, startled, as a plain looking girl bent over her desk to get a better look at her.

“I remember you.” She said. “You were at orientation.”

Lauren stared. The girl pouted, looking a little put out.

“Do you not remember me?” She asked, as she held out her hand. “I’m Alriya Prince… it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Lauren took her hand and nodded. She didn’t remember the girl at all.

“Is it okay if I sit here?” She asked, nodding at the seat next to her. Lauren didn’t answer. She didn’t feel the same sort of uneasiness around her that she did Claire Luxiana or the vampire from her Historia class, but she still knew nothing about her.

“Thanks.” Alriya said, without waiting for a response, as she moved by and sat down by her. Lauren flinched as she got out her things and set them on the table. Alriya wasn’t looking at her.

Lauren tried to distract herself by watching more of the students coming in. There were a handful of witches sitting right in front of her. She watched them carefully, this being the first time she had seen a group of them together since she had started reading up about them. She thought they might be aligned with the Noctis, as they were dressed primarily in black.

Another group of witches, sitting some distance away, had a lot of red hemmed into the clothing. They were talking and laughing amongst themselves about something. These were, Lauren was sure, Hellraisers. They looked a lot more monstrous and demonic than their Noctis counterparts. Hellraisers, she now knew, embraced their evil nature.

She also noticed that both groups kept their distance from one another. There was no overlap between them at all. It seemed almost as if they kept themselves completely segregated from one another.

There were, however, no Vampires. She had seen enough of them by now to recognize one by sight, and they had been very much present in both of the classes she had attended. Their absence was very conspicuous. It made her wonder what other kinds of creatures she had not yet seen, or taken notice of.

She turned her head to notice and noticed that Alriya Prince was looking at her. They broke eye contact almost immediately, and Lauren bent her head over the desk. Alriya was, if nothing else, the closest thing to a normal person she had encountered since coming to Grey Arcadia. Most people would probably have found this reassuring, but all Lauren could think of was her high school life, and how miserable she had been surrounded by people exactly like this.

The Spirit professor floated up to the board.

"Welcome, welcome." The Female Spirit said joyously. "Has everyone found their seats? Is everyone comfortable?"

The Noctis Witches in the front murmured their assent, bowing their heads. However the Hellraiser Witches let out an audible hiss. The idea of orderly conduct, it seemed, was abhorrent to them.

The Professor shifted, and the male personality took its place.

"If not, we're going ahead anyway."

The Hellraiser witches cheered, and the Noctis ones sat in a moody silence. Alriya and Lauren looked at each other. Alriya looked just as baffled as Lauren felt.

"Do you know what's going on?" Alriya asked. Lauren shook her head, and turned her gaze back up to the front of the room.

"Class has officially begun." The spirit said, as it pointed a hand towards the door. "Any student coming in now will be considered late."

The door burst open. The Hellraiser witches cackled as a disheveled looking girl burst into the room, looking around wildly.

'Did I make it?" she asked stupidly, raising her hand into a salute. "Um, Ellie Kennedy is here, sir!"

It was another girl from orientation. Lauren again found herself struggling to remember anything about her.

"Ah yes." The spirit said, as he turned to face the new arrival. "Perhaps we should make an examples of what happens when you arrive late, in my class."

She flinched as a large amount of school supplies came flying at her face, thrown by the Hellraiser side of the room. They jeered and made crude noises at her. Poor Ellie looked so taken aback that she wasn't quite sure what to do.

"Uh, is the the Intro to Political Evils class?" She asked.

The spirit changed.

"It is indeed." The female Professor Historia said, as she took her arm. "Please don't be late again, alright?"

Ellie nodded, as the spirit guided her to sit next to Lauren and Alriya. Alriya greeted her cordially, but Lauren said nothing.

"I got lost." Ellie hissed, as she set her things down. "No one wanted to give me directions!"

"You don't ask for directions at Grey Arcadia." Alriya said, sounding annoyed. "It's a good way to make yourself a target."

Ellie sniffed.

"Who's this?" She asked, changing the subject. It took Lauren a moment to realize that she was talking about her.

"That will be enough." The Professor said sharply, reverting back to its male form. The girls fell silent at once. Lauren felt incredibly ashamed: Although she had not spoken, the command had very much been directed at her, as well. It made her feel incredibly nauseous: She hoped that she wouldn't be singled out in the future.

"Now." The Professor said, as he turned around. "As I was saying, before we were so rudely interrupted… this is your Intro To Poliical Evils class. As you can plainly see, this will be unlike any other political class you have taken before."

He shifted back. The female spirit continued his speech.

"Rather than discussing specific political ideologies and how would work in an ideal world, we will be discussing the realities of what happens when these ideologies are put into practice. Simply put, nothing works. The Creatures of the Earth were not Created to form governments and organized societies. The laws that govern the land,

the buildings you live and work in everyday, and the common manner in which you conduct yourself are, simply put, completely unnatural."

She shifted back again.

"In a sense you are being forced to fit a role that you were not designed for." He said. "None of us can choose what sex we are born as, what country we belong to, who our family is, and what species you belong to. Your allies and enemies are decided for you upon being born into this world."

And again he changed back. Lauren was finding it difficult to discern whether the different personalities were on the same page or not.

"All governments will someday become corrupt and fail." She said. "It is inevitable... there can be no ideal government, people are naturally inclined to selfish behavior. However, it is a necessary evil."

She shifted back again.

"According to some." The Man said, and the Hellraiser side of the room snickered. "This is the most important lesson we can impart on you, I think, the universal truth… that relying absolutely on any form of government will lead to your own destruction."

He shifted back again. Yin smiled.

"But with no government, and no civilization, there is no progress." She said. "It is easy to look at the atrocities committed all over the world and forget completely about the benefits it has given us."

"Benefits?"

She jumped. The male personality, Yang, had come back so suddenly that she didn't even see it happen.

"Yes, benefits." Yin said, once again taking control. "The comforts and easy living of the modern world are due to civilization."

The Noctis witches all murmured their assent. Lauren looked hopelessly between Alriya and Ellie. Alriya was sitting with her fist against her cheek, looking bored. Ellie, however,was sitting absolutely enraptured.

“You speak of comforts, but for whom?” Yang snapped.

“This is not the time…” Yin began, but upon these words the Hellraiser half of the room hissed, and a handful of objects were thrown at the spirit. They passed right through it and into the blackboard.

“The point I am trying to make.” Yin said, raising her voice somewhat. “Is that governments are a necessary evil…”

“And I say they are not.” Yang said. “We need more dead rulers.”

The Hellraiser side of the room straight up cheered at these words. The Noctis sat silently, but Lauren could tell they were on edge. It occurred to her that she was witnessing one of the primary divides between the two alignments: The necessity of government.

“In this class.” Yin said, her voice becoming increasingly firm. “You will be learning about the intricacies of the politics of our world. Both the pros, and the cons.”

“There are no pros, for the record.” Yang interrupted, again causing the Hellraiser side to cheer. “Government inhibits personal freedoms.”

“The freedoms to kill, maim, and murder, you mean.” Yin said, exasperated. They were changing back and forth so quickly that Lauren, if she could only hear the voices, would have assumed was the argument of a married couple.

“Yes, the freedoms that allow you to live your life as you see fit.” He said. “To defend yourself against tyranny and oppression, to rise above monsters.”

At these words Alriya sat up in her chair. She suddenly looked alert.

“Violence.” Yin said, her voice patient. “Is nothing but a tool to protect civilization. It is not a freedom, or a right. It is a necessity.”

Alriya bent her head. She seemed to be deep in thought. She seemed much more contemplative about what was being , far more than either Ellie or Lauren.

“Civilization does not deserve to be protected-“

“It is a-“

One of the Noctis Witches raised her hand. It was a blonde haired girl: a pair of pigtails protruded out from under her hat and moved about, as if they were alive.

“Yes?” Yin said immediately.

“My apologies.” The Witch said formally. “But perhaps this discussion can wait until class has concluded?”

There was a hiss of dissent from the Hellraiser side of the room. A heavily tattooed girl shot the pig tailed one a dirty look.

“Yes, of course.” Yin said. “My apologies. However, this is the nature of this class. There are no truly correct answers to political questions. All we can do is the best we can.”

The Professor went on to explain the class much more formally after that. The purpose of the class, it was explained, was not to necessarily change your preconceived notions about opposing alignments. But to appreciate that your alignment, whatever it may be, was far from perfect.

When class let out the Professor informed them all that next class they would be discussing current events, and to read up on recent conflicts between the Hellraisers and the Noctis. And then they were free to go.

“That was very interesting.” Alriya said thoughtfully. The girls, as if by instinct, had drifted out of class together. Some of the Hellraiser boys had looked as if they would follow them, but the Noctis Witches, as a unit, blocked the door behind them as they headed out.

“Was it?” Ellie asked, a little put out. “I couldn’t understand a word of that. Could you?”

She addressed the question to Lauren. She jumped, a little taken aback.

“Uh, a l-little…”

“Most professors here are biased towards a specific alignment.” Alriya said. “I can’t even begin to tell you how thankful I am that we’re getting a nuanced discussion of the two primary powers.”

“Could that really be considered unbiased though?” Ellie asked, placing her hands on top of her head. “They sounded pretty opinionated to me…”

“It’s better than being screamed at about how all humans need to die.” Alriya said immediately. “My Military Magic Class has a Hellraiser instructor.”

“You’re taking Military Magic?” Ellie asked, shocked. “As a Freshman?”

“Well, yes.” Alriya said, a little bit surprised.

“They wouldn’t let me take it!” Ellie said. “They said I wasn’t qualified…”

“Well, you have to clear a lot of magic classes first.” Thousand said. “And some basic military courses, as well… I went to Military school, so I’m a lot further along than you are…”

Ellie slumped.

“That sucks.”

“You don’t come from a Military background.” Alriya explained to her, patiently. “You’re doing about as well as can be expected.”

Lauren felt completely lost. This was a side of Grey Arcadia she had not seen before. Girls, training for the Military? The thought seemed kind of strange, to her. But being as small and frail as she was, she herself had never even considered the military as a career. Perhaps normal girls did.

“What about you?” Ellie asked Lauren. “What classes are you taking?”

Lauren jumped again.

“Nothing.” She said. “Nothing at all.”

The two girls gave her odd looks. Lauren felt her face flush.

It was a reflex, a habit. Her parents, whenever they asked her a question about where she had been or what she had been doing, always expected her to say 'nothing.' If she said anything else, they would make her life miserable.

She remembered how she had admitted to them one time how she had developed a crush on a boy in her English class in seventh grade. Mother had asked her, out of the blue, if she had been interested in a boy, and she admitted yes.

"Does he have money?" She had said immediately. Lauren was forced to admit that she didn't know.

"If you don't know, he doesn't." She had said promptly. "Forget about him."

Lauren hadn't been able to forget about him, though. She kept watching him laugh with his friends from afar, hoping vainly that some day he would take notice of her. He never did, but the teacher did, and commented about it to her Mother.

It was not long after that that she found herself in a new school, with a new teacher and classmates.

"I… I need to go." Lauren said. "Excuse me."

She bent her head and quickly walked away from them. She could feel their eyes on the back of her head, and she was sure that the next topic of discussion would be her. She wouldn't be surprised if, come next week, neither of them would want to even come near her.

The thought made her feel incredibly depressed. They had been nothing but nice to her, but she had been incapable of even answering simple questions.

"Why am I so insane?" She asked aloud to herself.

(You're not insane.) Camila told her, her voice gentle. (You're just lonely, that's all)

Lauren almost felt her laugh. "Lonely? How is that any better?"

(You're meeting people now, aren't you?) Camila asked. (Claire… Ellie… Alriya… Ophelia.)

Lauren felt her heart seize up. She had not thought about Ophelia all day. She felt a little guilty: It felt like she had forgotten one of her closest friends.

(How many people in high school even ever spoke to you? How many of them even knew your name?)

No one did. Lauren thought. It was like she didn't even exist.

(Here, in this school, you exist.) Camila said. (Here, at Grey Arcadia, people know your name. And once you find your place here… your life will change.)

"Will it, though?" Lauren asked, a little apprehensively.

She could almost feel Camila's smile. (You know it.)

She snapped back to reality with a start. She stared around at the street around her. Nothing looked familiar. She had no idea where she was.

She had been so anxious to get away from Ellie and Thousand that she had simply started walking in one direction with no idea of what she would do next.

(Don't panic.) Camila warned her. (Look, just turn around and find something that looks familiar.)

Lauren nodded, and took a wary step back. She flinched as she found herself stepping right into someone walking right toward her. A very large, powerful someone.

"Watch where you're going!" The man snapped, as he reached a hand down to her shoulder. Lauren cried out as he shoved her rudely onto the stone sidewalk. She hit the ground hard and lay there, curled on the ground.

She expected another strike, but it never came. She heard a grumbling sort of mumble from right above her, and then the shuffling of footsteps. They were moving away.

She kept completely still, unwilling to budge from her position. She wasn't hurt, not badly anyway, but she felt a little apprehensive at the idea of getting back up right away. Perhaps if she moved too quickly, he would come back and hit her again.

(Come on, don't just lie there) Camila urged. (People are staring!)

They were? Lauren felt her self-consciousness overwhelm her fear. She sat up, wincing a little, as she cast a look around the street.

Camila had been right: there were a number of people, mostly men, who were staring at her hungrily. She felt her face redden, as she climbed to her feet, brushing the dirt off of her clothes.

(Well, that could have turned nasty.) Camila said. (We should get back home.)

"Yes."

Lauren turned around and quickly made her way back down the way she had came. She wasn't quite confident in her ability to find her way back, but Camila was quick to reassure her.

(You didn't take any turns, remember? Just keep going straight.)

She did as she was told. She felt her breath hitch in her throat as she found herself back in front of the building. She almost felt like she could cry.

(Good girl.) Camila said approvingly. (Let's go home and lie down.)

Lauren nodded to herself as she made her way back. Now that she was more familiar territory, it was less overwhelming to find her way back. But her emotional state was still unstable. She felt that if anything happened on the way back, she would fall into pieces.

(It'll be fine. I'm here)

Lauren took a tentative step forward. The noise of the people milling about her in every direction was overwhelming. She felt certain that she would be attacked.

(Calm down.) Camila instructed her. She was gentle, but firm. (It's not far.)

Lauren kept walking, but she could feel herself starting to shut down. This was never going to work. She would never be able to succeed at Grey Arcadia. Simply interacting with the people around her was too much.

(Remember Ophelia.) Camila said. (Remember how she made you feel.)

Lauren stopped. Everything around her seemed strange and alien, despite coming by this way twice before.

"Ophelia…." She murmured.

It had been so easy. She remembered. Her interactions with Ellie and Alriya had been stilted and awkward, despite their best attempts at being friendly. Ophelia had been different. Ophelia had truly understood her, and had done everything in her power to take care of her. She had done more than any of her teachers or even her own parents ever had. And she had asked for nothing in return.

Ophelia had been a person she had always wanted in her life. Someone that would dote on and take care of her, regardless of her problems and personality. And just as quickly as she had entered it, she was gone.

(This is why you're here.) Camilla told her. (To find people like that, and build lifelong friendships.)

Lauren felt as if she was going to cry.

(Let's go.)

Lauren felt herself moving down the street, past the stores and the people and back to the music hall. She opened the door to the find the Master playing, surrounded by people. She felt her heart swell.

Camila said nothing more. She found herself walking past the master, towards her chambers and towards her room. She flopped down on her bed and listened to the music envelop her completely.

Chapter 7

Lauren found herself staying in her room for several hours. She did not sleep, as Camilla had suggested, but she lay in bed and stared

up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

She could not stop thinking about what had happened in her Intro To Political Evils class. How uncomfortable she had been at the presence of Alriya and Ellie. How they had made her uncomfortable by simply talking about normal topics. How she had made a fool of herself by excusing herself out of nowhere, into the street. She had completely alienated herself to two girls who, she was sure, genuinely wanted to be her friend.

It bothered her. It always had. She knew she was the problem. She always had been. On the rare occasion she ever bonded with another girl, they always inevitably drifted away towards other people who were more well adjusted and normal. Honestly, she couldn't even blame them for it.

By next week Alriya and Ellie would have discussed the matter at length, and would choose not to associate with her again.

"Come on, you don't know that." Camila said cajolingly. Lauren had been so upset about this, that Camila had appeared for the first time since she had come to Grey Arcadia. She could see her lingering at the seat of the desk, playing with her hair as she stared deep into the mirror.

"I do know." Lauren said. "It happens every time." She hesitated, unwilling to admit it, even to herself. "Even Ophelia-"

She could see Camila turning sharply towards her. Her eyes seemed to glint with a strange fire.

"When have you ever met anyone like Ophelia?" She said sharply. "Is this truly the worst thing in your life?"

Lauren stared forlornly at the ceiling. "It is."

"I assure you it is not." Camila sniffed, turning back to the mirror. Lauren could see her face, vaguely, out of the corner of her eye. She was upset with her, certainly, but- "This place has been good to you. Has it not?"

"It has." Lauren admitted.

“And it will get better.” Camila said. “You have a place to live, a good job-“

“My job!”

Lauren felt herself panic for a bit. She almost leapt to her feet.

“Stay still.” Camila commanded. “You can wait another couple of hours.”

Lauren froze. The music coming from the hall was enveloping them completely. The Master, it seemed, approved of this.

“You’re doing well.” Camila said, her voice gentle. “Take a break. You have another class tomorrow. Magic 101, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Hm.” Camila said. “I imagine a lot of witches will take that one.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “It is probably our best bet to meet Ophelia again.”

“Yes.” Lauren said. It was unlikely that Ophelia would be in Magic 101… being older, and a witch, she would be much more advanced. Like Alriya Prince had been, she had likely been training at a much higher level for years already.

“But we will perhaps meet other witches associated with her.” She said. “We will certainly be around other Noctis Witches… and perhaps one of her sisters.”

Witches tended to refer to other witches who shared a demon master as their ‘sister.’ As Lauren had no idea who Ophelia’s Master was, however, she would not be able to identify one.

“I’m sure it will become clear to you eventually.” Camila said, sounding a little amused. “You seem a lot more calm.”

She was. She felt a little bit more optimistic about the next day. And what was more…

“After today.” She said. “It’ll be the weekend.”

Camila smiled winningly at her.

Lauren sat up and slid off the bed. By the time she had smoothed out her clothes and moved over to the mirror to check her reflection, Camila was gone. She made her way to the Hall and began her typical cleaning routine.

The Master said nothing to her. Lauren worried that he was disappointed with her. She worked diligently for an hour or so, trying to enjoy the music and pleasant atmosphere.

There was a much smaller crowd today. After what had happened the day before, it seemed that quite a few of the usual guests had not returned. After what had happened yesterday, Lauren could not blame them. But a few stragglers had come in. And she was beginning to recognize a number of faces.

The ones that stuck out to her the most were the witches.

Lauren had been watching them carefully: she had trying to discern just how to differentiate between different types of witches. She had been startled when she had realized that both Noctis and Hellraiser Witches came here. Although they gave each other a wide berth, Lauren had never had the opportunity to observe both, side by side, in a situation outside of class.

The first thing she noticed was that the Noctis tended to come in groups. Three or four of them would come in at once, greet her politely, and then take their seats. They would read or converse amongst themselves in hushed tones as the Master played. The Noctis tended to look more or less human. She saw a woman with an extra pair of arms, once, but she had kept them tucked under her cloak, just out of sight.

Hellraisers, in comparison, came independently, and looked far more wild. Girls with a blazing mane of fire instead of real hair, girls who had tattooed their entire body with horrifying artwork of humans being ripped to shreds by monster, and girls that looked more like cats than people, with yellow, slitted eyes and pointed ears coming out of their heads.

But still, these witches sat and watched the Master, perhaps more fervently than their Noctis counterparts. It was surprising, Lauren thought. She had seen how Hellraisers behaved in classes and on the streets, but here they seemed downright respectful.

It made her feel as if there was still a lot about Hellraiser culture that she didn't understand. The books she had read seemed to indicate that they despised art and culture. But she had also read that Hellraisers fundamentally believed in absolute independence and freedom: the ability to say and do whatever they liked. They despised authority and any that would claim that they must be subservient to it, without question. Perhaps coming here, to them, was a way of open rebellion against the principles of their own alignment.

But this was all just speculation, on her part. She had no idea, and she could not just ask. She turned her attention to other attendees.

Most of her interactions with had been with women, or creatures of an indeterminable sex. She had never really taken notice of the men at Grey Arcadia.

Nearly all of them were armed to the teeth. Gigantic swords hung off of their backs, powerful looking assault weapons strapped to their sides, and knives strapped to thick boots. She had seen girls with swords around campus several times already, but she felt somehow more intimidated seeing these men armed as they were.

She also had no idea whether these men identified themselves as Hellraisers or Noctis, or perhaps some other third party. There were no obvious signs, at least to her eye. The women and girls she had observed had typically adorned themselves with specific styles and colors to show off their alignment to those around them. If the men did the same, she could see no sign of it.

Perhaps she simply would need to spend more time around them, she thought, as she finished up for the day and headed back to her room. She put the question aside for later. It was time to get ready for her Magic 101 class.

This would be her last class for the week. Once she was done for the day, she would have a reasonable idea of what to expect for the rest of the semester. Once today was over, there would be no more surprises in any of her classes.

The thought filled her with a sort of nervous excitement. After today, things would stop being new and scary and become routine.

The Magic 101 building was in the opposite direction from her Intro To Political Evils class. She turned to the left and winced. A huge gaggle of bird like creatures, with sharp talon like feet and wings folded across their chests, walked towards her. Unlike most residents of Grey Arcadia, who tended to ignore her, these creatures looked her way. Their eyes were an odd, yellow color rather than white.

She found herself freezing as they passed by. She shirked off the side of the sidewalk as they looked at her. One of the creatures met her eye.

And then they passed by, without saying a word to her.

Lauren watched them go, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She was quite sure that those things preyed on humans. She felt herself feel a little nauseous at the thought of those powerful looking talons pinning her to the concrete, as those long cruel beaks tore apart her flesh.

She shivered, and stepped back into the sidewalk.

"You okay, kid?" A Black Cat asked lazily, from its perch on the side of the stairs to the hall. Lauren nodded faintly, her hand on her chest.

"Those were harpies, kid." The Cat said. "Half Man, Half Bird. They only eat meat. Human meat, if they can get it."

"I… see." Lauren said faintly.

"You should probably look both ways before you leave, just in case." The Cat said. "I can't look after you every day, you know."

"I… I know." Lauren said. "Uh, thank you."

The cat didn't respond. It lay its head back on the stone and closed its eyes. Lauren watched for it a while, deeply tempted to give it a good petting, but decided against it. She turned back around and walked down the sidewalk.

The encounter with the Harpies had made her somewhat apprehensive and suspicious of the people and animals passing by her each way. She already had a number of close calls with a number of individuals. There had been some that had been kind to her. Ophelia, The Master, The Black Cat… but they were so few and far between that they were little comfort to her. Rondo the Vampire Hunter had saved her from that Vampire, only to turn around and make her feel even more uneasy.

Any of these people on the street could tear her to pieces. The realization made her nervous. She bent her head and shuffled quickly to her destination, giving herself a wide berth from those around her.

The Magic Studies Building was far different than anything she had seen up this point. Gigantic, levitating rocks circled around the perimeter of the building, suspended in midair by an unseen force. Sprinklers lined on either side of the pavement shot up water that took the shape of people and animals, which danced amongst each other high above the ground.

Well, at least it would be easy to spot from a distance. Lauren thought faintly, as she watched the water take the shape of a dancing couple, twirling high above the ground.

As she stepped past the spurts of water, various small animals began to formulate and walk alongside her. Little rabbits, so transparent that you could see right through them, gently touched down on the pavement and hopped around her. She felt her heart melt. They were adorable.

"First time?"

She jumped. She looked up, embarrassed, at a smiling girl with long black hair, tied up in a kind of braid. The large, round hat she wore

Lauren recognized instantly. It identified her as a Witch of the Noctis. In her hands she was a surprisingly nice looking digital camera.

"Y-yes…" Lauren said, a little surprised, her eye on the camera. She was a little nervous that she just had her photo taking unknowingly. The girl smiled.

"Oh, I'm just taking shots of the water projections." She said. "For the University paper, you know…" She raised the camera. "Want to see?"

"Uh, sure." Lauren said, a little flabbergasted.

The girl scooted up next to her, and flipped through the camera's photo library. The first photo that was pulled up was of Lauren herself, walking along the pavement. The rabbits she had noticed were at her feet, but behind her a giant, beautiful fox stared down at her. She had not noticed it.

"Oh my…" Lauren breathed. The girl lowered the camera.

"Neat, huh?" The girl said, beaming. "Could I have your name? I'll be sure to credit you…"

"I'm… I'm Lauren Frey." Lauren said, still a little taken aback.

"F-R-E-Y…?"

"Yes, that's right."

The girl nodded to herself, as she adjusted her camera.

"Oh, someone's coming." Lauren said. The girl looked up as another girl, tall and muscular, turned and walked onto the pavement. Her companion raised her camera as the water began to take their shapes.

Above her head a giant ball of water stood high above the ground, perfectly round and unmoving. But on either side of her wolves of water walked, teeth bared. The girl reached out a hand and touched the wolf, her hand going right through the water.

“Ooh, that’s cool.” She said, as she caught sight of Lauren and the witch. “What is this, exactly?”

“It’s enchanted.” The girl said breathlessly, as she lowered her camera. “The shapes are supposed to reflect your personality.”

“Huh.” The girl, as she cast a look behind her. The wolves and orb were beginning to dissipate into thin air. “I didn’t need a magic spell to tell me that I’m a werewolf.” She turned back around and rubbed her shoulder. Her eyes fell on Lauren.

“Oh, hey you.” She said immediately. “Lauren Frey, right?”

Lauren jumped.

“H-how did you know my name?” She stammered. The girl smiled at her.

“Come on, it hasn’t been that long.” She said. “We met out in front of that orientation building, remember? We talked for a bit.”

Lauren gave a small start.

“Oh, Emilia!”

Emilia clapped her hands, looking pleased. “That’s me!” She said. “So you do remember.”

“I… I’m sorry!” Lauren said. “I… I didn’t forget you, I just… didn’t expect to-“

She was startling out of her rambling by Emilia’s laughter.

“It’s fine.” She said. “I’ve been meeting a lot of new people too.”

“Oh!”

Another person was coming down the pavement. The girl raised her camera again, and Emilia gestured for Lauren to follow her into the building.

“So where are you headed, Lauren?” Emilia asked.

“Ummm… Magic 101.”

“Me too!” Emilia said, looking pleased. “Hang on, are we in the same class?”

They procured their schedules and held them out.

“Yes!” Emilia crowed. “Wow, cool! It’ll be nice to already know someone for once.”

Lauren nodded, feeling a little apprehensive. In truth she was a little intimidated. Emilia towered over in her height, and had a much more outgoing personality. People like that always made her feel uneasy. In her experience, people like that didn’t care about her at all.

“How’s College Life treating you so far?” Emilia asked, as they ascended the stairs. Lauren bent her head, unable to look at her.

“I… fine.”

“That’s good.” Emilia said, humming. “My roommates are kind of a pain, so I’ve been spending a lot of time out of the house. The campus isn’t nearly as dangerous as they say is it, don’t you think?”

“Uhhh…”

Lauren felt just the opposite, but felt it would be a poor idea for her to say so. She knew from experience just how little other people cared about her problems.

“Oh, this is it.” Emilia said. They came to a stop outside the classroom door.

“Hopefully the instructor isn’t a creep.” Emilia sniffed, as she pushed her way through the door. Lauren, feeling a little apprehensive, trailed behind her, head bowed.

“Ah, welcome…”

Emilia came to a stop. Lauren crashed right into her. She was so much bigger than her that Emilia didn’t even budge.

“What are you?” Emilia asked. “Some kind of vampire?”

Lauren peered out from behind Emilia’s back to get a better look at their instructor. Her first, immediate thought that the creature hanging upside down in front of them was indeed a vampire. Leathery wings wrapped around its body like a cloak, enveloping its

entire body within it. Big, round black eyes blinked at them, as if surprised.

“No, no.” The creature corrected her. “I am Nightbyte Pippin.”

“You’re a witch?” Emilia asked, a little disbelievingly. She raised her head and sniffed the air. “But you’re-“

“NightByte is a bat demon.” Pippin said, as if she had had to explain this several times before. “But enough about me. What of you?”

“I’m Emilia Fenrir.” Emilia said. Lauren let out a surprised noise as she reached around and pushed her forward. “And this is my friend, Lauren.”

“Welcome, both of you.” Pippin said. She twisted from her perch to look around at the seats in front of her. “I assume you would like to sit together?”

“Yes!” Emilia said immediately. She stopped, as if remembering herself, before turning to look at Lauren.

“If that’s okay with you…?” She asked, more softly.

Lauren nodded, unable to meet her eye.

“Lovely.” Pippin said. “Please take your seats and wait for class to begin.”

Lauren followed Emilia to a seat in the back row. They took their places and sat down.

“You get all sorts at Grey Arcadia, huh?” Emilia asked. “She smells just like a vampire.”

“Smells…?” Lauren wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, I forget sometimes that humans don’t have a keen sense of smell.” Emilia said. “Sorry.”

“But you’re human right now, aren’t you?”

“A human shape.” Emilia said. “But the Wolf never really goes away.” She smiled. “The girl doesn’t either.”

Lauren stared at her. There was still so much she didn't know about the people of Grey Arcadia. It was beginning to dawn on her just how complex the social structure here actually was.

It was a different kind of uncomfortable atmosphere than she was used to. The people filling into the room were almost nonexistent to her: None of them looked their way at all, and most sat far away from them. That suited her just fine, but Emilia kept trying to spur on friendly conversation. Lauren tried her best to answer, but the conversation often fell flat. Lauren was nothing like other girls: She had no idea how to hold a casual conversation.

She found herself watching Pippin swing back and forth on her perch. Her large, round black eyes were always focused on whoever she was speaking to, but Lauren found herself thinking that those large, pointed ears on top of her head couldn't just be for show. Bats located their prey using echolocation. Perhaps her Contract with NightByte had given her that ability.

"What kind of teacher do you think she is?" Emilia asked, leaning in over the desk. Lauren felt her heart jump.

"I- not sure."

Emilia nodded. Her smile wasn't as wide as before. Lauren felt her heart sink. Emilia was starting to realize that she wasn't normal.

Pippin turned her eyes to look at them, and Lauren knew immediately that she had heard them. She flinched and sat back further in her chair. Emilia's eyes darted between the two of them, noticing the exchange.

"There's nothing to be afraid of." She said. "Not right now, at least." Her eyes were on a couple of girls who had taken a seat just in front of them. They weren't looking at them at all. They weren't Witches, Lauren thought. They looked fairly ordinary, save for the purple flowers embedded into their clothes.

"That's Wolfsbane." Emilia said. "It's poisonous to werewolves and other predators. Some students think having it on them will protect them."

“Does it work?”

Emilia wrinkled her nose. “Kind of. It’s super poisonous and can be used on weapons. But in that form it’ll only kill if it’s ingested.”

Lauren looked back down on the girls. They were laughing amongst themselves. They seemed to have no idea that there was anything wrong.

“Should we say something to them?” Lauren asked, anxiously.

Emilia shook her head.

“I’m a werewolf.” She said, her voice glum. “If I say anything, they’ll just think… I don’t know, that I’m trying to weaken their defenses or something.”

She looked rather despondent all of a sudden. Lauren wasn’t sure what to say. Before she could speak, however, Pippin adjusted herself on her perch, and in a surprisingly loud voice.

“Alright, class. Take your seats.”

Lauren focused her attention on the Witch. She was determined to make a good, positive impression.

“Welcome to Magic 101.” Pippin said. She raised her arm, exposing a thin wing. A magical orb of pure energy began to swirl around her claw like hand. It was a beautiful orb, pure white in color. The class sat, enraptured.

“Here you will learn the fundamentals of Magic.” Pippin said. She closed her hand, and the orb burst. A vast array of beautiful colors burst out and swirled around the classroom. The class let out an awed gasp as the swirling colors shot in a straight line around the room, finally converging above their heads. A beautiful rainbow spread out above them, glinting beautifully.

“Magic.” Pippin said. “Exists all around us. You may not notice it, or even believe that it is there, but it exists all the same. The purpose of this class is to teach you all the fundamentals that all Magical Arts share, and to prepare you for what you will encounter in your studies in this field.”

Lauren sat very attentively as Pippin described the curriculum. Next to her Emilia sat slouched, fist on her cheek, her eyes glazed over. Lauren felt a strong revulsion towards her: It reminded her of her Mother.

"Magic." Pippin said. "Is an instrumental part of everything we do here at Grey Arcadia. It is what we are famous for, and we have grown to cater to a wide range of students from every background imaginable."

"Including Hellraisers?" One of the boys sitting in front said loudly. He was a great, burly sort. He looked older than a college student, with his hairless head and ferocious fire tattoos.

"Including Hellraisers." Pippin said, nodding. "This University does not discriminate."

The boy let out a guffaw. Pippin smiled at him before turning away.

"Regardless of your background, your journey at Grey Arcadia begins here, under my instruction." She said. "I do not wish to alarm you, but your performance in this class will affect your studies here going forward."

Lauren felt herself seize up. This was unexpected: she had not been told anything like this in her other classes. She had chosen all of her classes haphazardly, with no idea of where she wanted to take her academic career at Grey Arcadia. She had feared that none of the classes she had chosen would be of any value to her.

But Magic 101… if it was half as important as Pippin was saying, it was imperative that she pass. If she passed, it would open a wide range of doors for her at Grey Arcadia. She already knew from her conversations with Alriya Prince and Ellie Kennedy that the Military needed people who could use magic. That had no interest for her, but the fact that it existed made her think that there were even more specialized branches of magic out there.

Could there be one… one that she of all people could do well in?

Pippin spoke at length for quite some time more, but Lauren found herself thinking more about her long term plans at Grey Arcadia.

What other fields of study were there? What would her next step be, after this class?

“We will not begin the lessons until next week.” Pippin said. “Today I simply wanted to go over the curriculum and what you will be expected to learn over these next twelve weeks.”

She raised her hand again, and a number of pieces of chalk began to rise up behind her. Lauren watched, entranced, as the pieces of chalk ran over the board together, creating elaborate diagrams and symbols. It was a stunning sight.

“The first matter of business.” Pippin said. “Is understanding your own abilities. Magical power, for the uninitiated, can be difficult to understand and control. Even dangerous. I am sure that all of you already know how difficult it can be to first unlock your own hidden magical power. Most of those who do, through strong emotions or other means, end up killing or harming themselves and those around them. Magic is an unstoppable force: One that needs to be reined in and controlled at all times.”

Lauren was sitting, enraptured.

“You must not.” Pippin said. “Allow yourself to be overwhelmed by this power, under any circumstances. You will not survive.”

She bent her head. She stared down at the wooden desk below her. It was an intimidating thought. Her own emotions were so unstable that it was for her to imagine losing control. She thought back to last night, and how she couldn’t move from her bed for several hours. She felt her lip tighten. She felt almost as if Pippin was speaking directly to her.

If anyone would let their wayward emotions destroy them, it would be her.

“But with a strong mind, and determination, this need not happen.” Pippin said. Lauren looked up. She felt her heart swell.

“With this in mind.” Pippin said. “You must learn control, before you learn magic.”

She went on to explain, at length, the syllabus for the semester. First they would focus on controlling the magical energy inside of them. Then they would learn to harness the energy into an 'aura.' This, she explained, was the simplest, safest way to practice using magical energy. And finally, they would begin utilizing their aura.

"An Aura." Pippin explained. "Is a reflection of your own inner strength."

"Yeah." Emilia said quietly. "A powerful one can stop bullets."

Lauren turned to look at her, shocked, as Pippin continued speaking about how auras could be strengthened with diligent training and study.

"I understand that some of you may have come from communities that pushed you into more advanced arts." Pippin said. "But it is essential that you do not forget the basics."

Emilia yawned.

When the class ended, they gathered up their things and stood up. The atmosphere was a lot more relaxed than Lauren was used to seeing: A number of people had stayed behind to chat with each other.

"Ready to go?" Emilia asked.

Lauren nodded. They stepped past the rows of people and made their way to the door. Pippin was swinging by her perch, looking as serene as ever.

"See you next week!" She said politely, bowing her head at them.

"Yeah, we will." Emilia said.

She smiled, and Lauren felt an intense wave of power emanating from her. She reeled back, wide eyed and surprised. Emilia had not moved at all, and yet somehow an invisible force seemed to be rising up from her, pushing her away.

Pippin stopped swinging. All around them people were turning to look at them. One of the witches had dropped a toad she had been holding.

“Ah.” She said. “I see that you have already been trained.”

The feeling subsided.

“Yeah.” Emilia said. “Since I was a kid.”

“Well then.” Pippin said. “I’m sure you will do exceptionally well here.”

Emilia turned away and walked out the door. Lauren gave one last anxious look at Pippin, before heading on after her.

“What was that?” Lauren asked, as they hit the stairwell.

“That?” Emilia stepped down the first step. She was so tall, her head was still higher than Lauren’s. “Was my aura.”

“Really?” Lauren was intrigued.

“Yeah.” Emilia said. “I felt like showing off, after that speech.” She seemed rather pleased with herself. Lauren, however, was not.

“That was an aura?” She asked.

“Yeah.” Emilia repeated. “Have you never felt one before?”

“No…” Lauren said, shaking her head. “Never!”

“Hm.” Emilia said, turning to look at her. “So you’re starting from scratch, is that it? Your first ever magic lesson?”

She nodded. She suddenly felt very apprehensive. She didn’t like the way this conversation was going at all. She was sure that Emilia would tease or make fun of her for not having any idea what she was doing.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re starting now.” Emilia said. “There’s no place better to learn magic at an older age.”

She didn’t sound judgmental at all. Lauren felt herself relax.

“When did you start training, then?”

“Well, I’m a Fenrir werewolf.” Emilia said. “So I’ve been dangerous since I was born. My family starts off with keeping our young isolated from normies… uh, that’s what we call normal people… so they can be trained to understand how dangerous they are. At

around four or five years old, you can start being treated like a normal child, and at seven you can begin learning magic and combat skills… again, an essential skill in our family."

Lauren was completely taken in by this.

"What do you mean by Fenrir werewolf?" She asked.

They were in the main hall of the magic building now. A little moon shaped stained glass window was in their line of sight. Emilia jabbed her finger up at it.

"There are different kinds of werewolves." She explained. "My family… the Fenrir… are the kind that become uncontrollably dangerous every month, on the night of the full moon. We're perfectly normal, respectable people most of the time." She coughed. "Well, usually. But because of that time of month where we are completely out of control, we have a lot of natural enemies. Other wolves, mostly, but anything remotely civilized tend to hate us. And it's hard to blame them."

"I don't hate you." Lauren said, immediately. Emilia smiled at her.

"Well, you will if you're around me during the full moon." She said. "Make sure that never happens, okay?"

They found themselves out of the building onto the street.

"But yeah, I've been learning magic for a long time." Emilia said. "And I've had some really good teachers."

"So why are you in Magic 101?"

"The University requires it." Emilia said, immediately. "You'd be surprised at the number of Witches who can't properly utilize their own magic at all. They like to verify that you're at a certain level before you can move on."

"So what are you hoping to move into?"

"Me?" Emilia fingered her hair. "Well, I think I'll just study wherever since I'm here. My family already has a nice job waiting for me back home. My main purpose here is to… uh, form closer ties with other werewolf families. Networking, I suppose you might call it."

“Networking?” Lauren repeated.

“Yeah.” Emilia said. “My family has always been at odds with a lot of others, and older people don’t forgive and forget so easily. What I want to do here is forge stronger ties with the younger members of those families.”

“Like… a political marriage?” Lauren asked.

Emilia choked, looking a little surprised. Lauren recoiled, expecting to be rebuked.

“Oh, I hope not.” Emilia said, looking very taken aback. “No… no that wouldn’t be a good idea at all.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you.” Lauren said, a little quickly. “I thought-“

“Yeah, it kind of sounded like I was looking to get married, didn’t it?” Emilia asked. She shook her head. “No, we don’t mix… uh, sexual relationship wise. It causes problems for kids. No, you either marry someone from your own family… which isn’t recommended, obviously… or you marry a normie. You don’t marry another wolf from another family. It’s taboo.”

“I had no idea.” Lauren said softly. Her mind was awhirl. She had no idea werewolf culture was so complicated.

“Well, enough about me.” Emilia said. “What about you? What are you hoping to do here?”

Lauren couldn’t answer the question, at first. She stared out into the street. She was deep in thought.

“I… don’t know yet.” She said. “I came here because… I wanted to come to college. I only just started thinking about what I want to do today.”

She nodded.

“For now, I just want to learn magic.” She said. “And from there… we’ll see.”

Emilia nodded.

“Well, if you’re just getting started, small steps are a good start.” She said.

Lauren found herself smiling. “Yes.”

She had taken a long time to realize this, but she liked Emilia. She liked her a lot. When they went their separate ways, Lauren felt a little sad to see her go.

(She isn’t like Ophelia.) Camilla said. (We’ll see her again next week. Maybe sooner.)

“You think so?” Lauren asked, as she hurried back to the Hall of Music. She felt a strong sense of elation. Not only had she made a new friend, but she had made it through her first full week at Grey Arcadia.

(As long as you show up, that is.)

“Do you think I won’t?”

(Of course I don’t.) Camilla said. (Don’t be ridiculous.)

She entered the Hall of Music with a flourish. A number of the usual guests were situated all around. Lauren dropped her things off in her room, and then came back to the hall to make sure that everything was well.

More than a few guests greeted her by name. She returned the greeting, but felt herself unable to name any of the people she was beginning to recognize. The toothless old witch dressed in a shawl smiled at her as she raised a skull shaped chalice of red liquid to her lips.

“Hello, dearie.” She said. “You have been hard at work, have you?”

“I… I try my best.” She said faintly. The skull looked awfully real…”

“I’ve been watching.” The old woman said, nodding her head. “Oh, yes… you’re the best girl that’s worked here in a long time. A long time.”

“There have been others?” The Master never talked about this sort of thing.

“Oh yes.” The Witch said, nodding. “More than I could count.”

“Whatever happened to them?”

The Witch shook her head. “Who can say…?”

Lauren bid her goodbyes and moved on. Once she was satisfied that all was well, she retired to her room and began thinking seriously about her plans for her first weekend.

(“Well, it’s study time.”) Camilla said. (“What do you want to work on first?”)

“Well.” Lauren said, eyeing all of her books apprehensively. “We’re pretty well read on History and Literature… and I suppose we’re well informed on Politics…”

(You want to try Magic now, don’t you?) Camilla teased. She was sitting on the bed, her legs crossed. Her foot bounced up and down with excitement.

“Yes.” Lauren said immediately. “I do.”

(Be careful.) Camila warned, as Lauren fumbled with her magic textbook. (Pippin said magic was dangerous.)

“I will.” Lauren promised. “Actually… something has been bothering me for a while…” She lay the book on her desk and cracked it open.

(“Oh?”)

“Pippin said she would be teaching us to control our magic.” Lauren said. “But she was talking like… we should have already known how to use magic.”

(“Yes…”) Camila murmured. (“Unlocking our magic, she called it.”)

“I haven’t done that.” Lauren said, glancing across the textbook. “Does that mean… I don’t have magic to control?”

(“She said everyone has magic, remember?”)

“She also said that not everyone can use magic.” Lauren responded. “And… Emilia said it was normal for people to start training very young.”

(She also said it was fine that you were starting now.)

"You're too optimistic."

(And you're too cynical.)

"Hm."

Lauren's eyes glanced over the first introductory pages.

The Aspiring Mage must dedicate onself fully to the art of magic. It is not a practice that one can devote themselves to halfheartedly: It must become a part of oneself, mind body and soul.

(What is this gibberish?) Camilla complained.

"I think it means that using magic isn't easy." Lauren said. "And that we shouldn't even try unless we're serious."

(Are you serious enough?)

"Well, I have to be." Lauren said, looking down at the book. "If I want to do well in the class."

(Performing magic does sound cool.) Camilla admitted. (So where do we start?)

"Let's see." Lauren said. "First of all… I need to find my inner self."

(Inner self? What does that mean?)

"I'm not sure." Lauren said slowly, panning over the pages. "It's pretty vague…"

(Pippin mentioned that strong emotions could trigger magical powers.)

"She did." Lauren acknowledged. "But I've never felt anything like what Emilia showed us today…. Even at my lowest point."

(Emilia's pretty advanced though.) Camilla pointed out. (Maybe an amateur attempt would look different.")

"That was an aura." Lauren recalled. "I'm just trying to reach my magic."

(There has to be a better explanation for reaching your magic in that book.) Camilla said.

"It doesn't look like it…" Lauren murmured, as she parsed through the opening passages. The book was describing the importance and history of magical development in oneself. Much like Pippin herself had, it seemed to have the impression that she already knew how to use magic.

"Don't tell me Magic 101 is too advanced for me…" Lauren said, her face falling.

(Don't say that.) Camila said sharply. (Come now. Give it a second look.)

Lauren did so, flipping through several pages.

One's magic is an intinsical part of oneself. Your magic is your soul, given shape and form. Using your soul under less than necessary situations will destroy you.

"What does that mean?" Lauren asked.

("Using Magic is dangerous.") Camila said. ("Pippin mentioned that too.")

"She… did?"

Lauren frowned, straining her memory to remember. She had no recollection of ever being told anything of the sort.

(If magic comes from the Soul.) Camila said. (Using it must put a lot of stress on the body.)

"The book says as much, yes…" Lauren muttered, as she flipped through a handful of pages.

(If a magic is a natural part of our existence.) Camila said. (The body therefore must have a method of naturally handling that stress.)

"…Huh?"

(This isn't going to be fast or easy, Lauren.") Camila said. (You need to understand that now. It's going to take a lot of study and training.)

Lauren sighed, closing her eyes.

“I need…” She said. “To spend the weekend figuring this out.”

(Good girl.) She said. (The Bookstore?)

“I haven’t been back there since I picked up my schoolbooks…” She said. The thought of buying more books from that shopkeeper made her nauseous.

(Where else are we going to find books?)

“A library?”

(Do you own a library card?)

Lauren stiffened. “No…”

(Bookstore it is. Chop chop.)

“Now?”

(They’re closed on Saturdays.)

“They are?” Lauren hadn’t noticed that either.

(Yeah, so if you wait and don’t end up going tomorrow… you’ll have to wait until Sunday.)

“So you’re saying I should go now?” Lauren felt herself deflate. She had been in such good spirits, when she had thought she wouldn’t have to go back out into public for three whole days.

(I don’t remember the exact time they close tonight.) Camilla admitted. (But you should go as soon as possible.”)

Lauren felt as if a strong weight was holding her in place. She felt trapped: there was no way out of this.

“Okay…” She said, quietly. “Um, let’s go.”

The Hall was very crowded when she left. She felt a strong urge to abandon her current task and head back to her room. She knew perfectly well by now that the Hall was most active when the streets of Grey Arcadia were at their busiest. A lot of people came here in between shopping trips and shifts at work, when they wanted to get away for a while.

If normal people couldn’t handle it… how could she?

She felt her heart race as she stepped to the front door. She hesitated for a moment, before turning the handle and stepping out into the street.

She flinched at the sight of those walking Grey Arcadia. A giant man with the head of a crocodile opened his mouth, and a bright white bird shot out, zooming across the heads of passerby ahead before quickly darting back to whence it came. A young boy on the other side of the street was sitting on the side of the road, strumming an instrument that writhed and twisted with every note, letting off a dark, foreboding melody. A well dressed woman dressed in a deep black dress suit walked by her, speaking into a cell phone.

"Cursing the firstborn." She said, her voice clear and professional. "Is illegal under Americana Law. I do not care what his motives were. I will see him hanged."

She looked up to see Lauren Frey staring at her. She grimaced, baring her teeth at her before turning away again. She had been a vampire. A vampire, clearly, involved in some kind of law enforcement.

"Don't see you out of the Hall this time of day."

The black cat had raised its head up at her.

"Oh… yes." Lauren said, surprised, turning to face it. "I… I need to pick up a new book."

"Hmmmm." The cat said. "Do be careful. Books are lovely, but they can lie."

He lay his head back down on the stone and closed his eyes. Lauren thanked him quietly before stepping down the steps and into the street.

The people looked even bigger and taller at street level. Her heart beat wildly as she passed creatures made entirely of ruby, of girls with snakes in their hair and the music store where the girl with the guitar sat strumming beautifully, her head bent.

And soon, she found herself in front of Night Owl Books. She was so nervous that she wasn't able to walk right in: She found herself checking the store's hours on the little plaque out front, and she found herself a little surprised to see that Camila had been right. The store was closed on Saturdays, but open all hours throughout the rest of the week. Including, seemingly, all throughout the night.

It took her a moment to build up her courage to step inside. Unlike last time she had been here, in which she had simply handed a list of books to be sent to her room, she would have to spend some time looking for what she needed.

"A beginner's guide to magic…" She murmured. "A beginner's guide to magic…"

Or maybe…

"How to reach your magic?"

She was completely lost. If she didn't pick out the right book, she would be right back to where she started. She hadn't realized that the assigned book wasn't going to help her until an hour ago. If she made another bad choice, then that would set her back even more.

She wished she had Emilia or Ophelia with her. She recalled how naturally Ophelia had explained so many of the quirks of Grey Arcadia to her, or how Emilia had given her a brief rundown of what an education in magic was supposed to look like. Surely they would, at the very least, point her in the right direction.

She finally worked up the courage to open the door and step inside.

She had never seen another person that wasn't an employee in there before. She found herself flinching as the man turned to look at her.

"Ah, good evening." The man said, tipping his top hat. Dressed in a pure black suit, with a red undershirt and black top hat, he looked like an ordinary distinguished gentleman from perhaps the 1800's. She couldn't identify whether or not he was human or something else, but the fact that he took notice of her made her instantly put up her guard.

“Never trust a man who speaks to you, Lauren.” Mother told her, the first time it had happened to them when they had taken a trip to the grocery store. “They only want one thing.”

Lauren turned her gaze downward and ignored him. To her absolute horror, however, he stepped in front of her and held out a hand, encased in a snow white glove.

“You are.” He said. “A student at the University, no?”

Whenever a man spoke to her this way, her mother was usually quick to intervene and send him on his way, but today she had nothing. She honestly had no idea what to do.

“You don’t have to say anything.” The man said, smiling a pure white smile. “Just watch.”

He raised the back of his hand. His eyes on hers. She watched him, a little apprehensively as he twisted his hand around. In it was a single card, with a large number 8 on it, alongside another symbol.

“Watch closely…

He raised a deck of cards in his other hands and began to quickly shuffle them. His hands were quick and precise. And then he held the deck out to her.

“Draw.”

She did so. She frowned as she looked at the card.

“is this your card?”

Lauren stared at it.

“Uh, I think so…” She said. “The number is the same…”

He stared at her, before reaching out to take it from her.

“It is.” He told her, in the sort of voice that suggested that it was something she should have already know. “The eight of spades.”

“Oh.” Lauren said. She had never played a game of cards in her life. She had been looking at the number, not the shape. She wouldn’t have even been able to name it even if she had. She wasn’t entirely

sure what was happening. But she remembered herself immediately, and turned away from her.

The man turned away from her, and she chanced a glance back at him. He was looking at the card with a bemused expression on his face. She turned back around, feeling a little bit guilty. Whatever he had wanted from her, he had not gotten it.

It made her think of herself. She had come in here lamenting just how she wanted someone here, to help her navigate these rows of books. In a way, she knew how he felt.

She turned back around, her heart hardening. But… she also knew that there was a reason that he didn't get what he wanted. She didn't want to be around him. She wondered if Ophelia or Emilia had felt the same way about her. They had both been very nice, but they had not sought her out again after their brief time together came to an end. She had met Emilia again purely by chance, and it felt like they were becoming friends but that would probably end soon. She doubted that Emilia would continue associating with her once she realized what kind of person she was. And it wasn't her fault. It wasn't.

She found herself standing in the middle of the rows of books, staring up. She had found herself of the 'Common History' section. A brief look to her right showed a 'Historia' section. She wasn't sure what 'Common' History was, so she allowed herself a brief look.

These were textbooks detailing the rise and fall of various countries around the world. Wars fought, individuals like Napoleon and Genghis Khan, important political events. They looked just the same as the ones she used to see in her high school library.

She moved over to Historia and saw a striking difference between them. Dinosaur Warfare, Great Sorcerers throughout History, The Age of Chaos.

It seemed these were nonfiction books covering supernatural events that occurred before human history. She pulled Dinosaur Warfare off the shelf and popped it open. She was taken aback by the stunning

illustration of a triceratops equipped with sleek white armor that covered the sides of its body, charged towards a creature with long, tentacle like limbs and a gaping mouth. The caption below the image described how Triceratops commonly played defensive roles in wars against other dinosaurs and the Starpawn. Their heads served as natural shields against ranged fire and were almost impossible to break through. The armor was designed to protect its vulnerable areas… but even still the armor was more commonly penetrated than the head.

She put the book back and stepped away. This was very interesting, but she needed to rethink what she was doing. She needed to find a 'magic' section. Not a history book, not a political focused one. A practical, self help book on how to learn how to use magical powers.

She cast her gaze upward, trying to find the section that she was looking for. She could see that she was in the nonfiction part of the store, so that was a good start. She would walk up and down these rows until she found something that looked promising.

She turned out into the floor and almost found herself walking right into a beastman. This one had the shape of a black panther. It hissed at her, its fur standing on end.

It was far bigger than she was. She stepped back into the aisle and allowed it to pass. It did so, its nose pointed at the ceiling. Lauren waited a moment before going again, this time taking a moment to look before stepping out onto the floor.

She browsed the shelves for a while, fighting back the temptation to look at titles such as 'The Alchemist' Almanac' and "Witches of the World." She passed by rows and rows of books until she came to one simply titled 'Magic.'

Encouraged, she stepped into the aisle and stared up at the rows and rows of books. She saw her very own Magic textbook here, and immediately checked the textbooks on either side of it. She saw 'Advanced Magic' and 'The Dark Arts.' Discouraged, she walked along the rows of books, staring hopelessly at the wide array of books. There was 'The Art of Healing' which seemed to be about saving

lives using magic. There was also ‘Olympian Might’ which she thought involved requesting favors from the gods of Olympus. There was ‘On Witchcraft’ which was obviously about the process of becoming a witch.

And then she saw it. Her heart skipped a beat. “The Beginner’s Guide to Magic.” She could see a little blurb under the cover that said that this was a must read for those who wanted to learn.

She took the book and flipped it open. The first thing words she saw were:

“You can do magic!”

Elated, she closed the book and turned around. She had what she was looking for. She tucked the book under her arm and moved towards the front. She said nothing to the Witch behind the counter as she paid for her book, her head bent. The Witch too said nothing, although she somehow felt she was being judged. Hopefully… hopefully this would be the last time she would have to come in.

Lauren felt her heart beating wildly as she clutched the book across her chest. She stepped out of the store and hurried home. She felt elated. She had done it. She had managed to take her first step to learning magic.

She could barely contain herself as she walked briskly down the street through the crowds, leapt up the steps to the hall of music, and rushed through the hall of music to her room. Soon… in a very few short moments…

She set the book down on the table in front of her and opened it. She stared down at the pages with bated breath, trying to piece together what she needed to do first.

“Unlocking my magic…” She murmured, as she flipped through the pages. “I need to reach my inner magic…” She eagerly ran her eyes over the words on the page, trying to find the information she so craved.

This book was quite a bit different than the textbook she had been using previously. First of all it made no mention of magical energies

or training at all. No, it was focused on deflection, sleight of hand, and trickery…

She stopped. Her breath hitched in her throat. She flipped the book shut.

"A Beginner's Guide To Magic: How To Become A Magician."

She read the words with horror, and as her eyes trailed downward that feeling within her became almost overwhelming.

"Learn the tricks of the trade: Fool your friends, amaze strangers, and baffle onlookers with a number of simple tricks!"

She let out a cry as she slammed her head onto the table. The stinging pain in her head was nowhere near the emotional turmoil running through her entire being. She found herself sliding off the chair and onto the floor, and simply lay there, pressed up against her desk.

Who had she been kidding? What had she thought was going to happen? She had no shot. She had no chance. There was nothing she could have done to prevent the inevitable. She had failed before she had even started. She should never have even been born.

She spent that entire night staring up at the ceiling, wondering just why she cared so much. She knew very well that what her parents were saying was true. All she would need to do to become successful was to marry into money, as soon as soon as she was no longer a child. Her parents had pushed her down that path all her life, and had constantly reassured her that school was nothing more than a formality, a place she could go while they had fun.

But then… why had she been so upset? Why did she care so much? Why was it that every time that she failed…. It caused her so much pain? She spent so long mulling over that question, she spent all night thinking about it. So late in fact that she ended up not sleeping at all, and ended up oversleeping and missing her bus.

She was pathetic academically, and yet… she didn't want to be.

“It’s important to you.” Camila’s voice came so suddenly that she gave a bit of a start. The entire room had somehow become dark.

“Camila?” She asked, a little apprehensively. She was so taken aback that she had completely forgotten her distress.

“You want to do well in school.” Camila’s voice said again. “Because it is important to you.”

She had not imagined the voice. It was right there, in the room with her. She choked back her fear and turned around.

The room, which usually was so bright, comforting, and warm, was oddly unbecoming in the dark. Shapes that she was sure were her things were jutting out at odd angles. The shadows were somehow larger and darker than they should have been. They were intimidating to her.

“Hello…?” She whispered. “Master?”

One of the shadows moved. Lauren felt herself jolt backward, slamming her head into the desk. She saw stars.

“Lauren, are you alright?” The voice said again, this time sounding much more concerned.

There was nothing there. Lauren thought to herself, as she struggled to her feet, holding her head. She fumbled forward, towards the door, and switched on the light.

The room was empty. Everything was as she had left it. She let out a sigh and rubbed her aching head.

(Sorry for frightening you.) Camila said softly.

“No, it’s okay.” Lauren said. “You just… surprised me, that’s all.”

Camila laughed.

(A good surprise makes you forget all your problems, huh?)

Lauren felt her heart sting with guilt. She looked down at the book in shame.

(Don’t worry about it.) Camila advised her. (Look, why don’t you give the actual textbook another look?)

She reached for her bag and brought out her Magic textbook. She opened it on her lap and peered inside.

(Maybe it'll make more sense if you keep studying it.) Camilla suggested. (And you'll have a better idea of what you need to do.)

Lauren stared at the words on the page.

(Don't worry about using magic.) Camilla said. (You need to simply understand how it's done.)

Lauren stared forlornly at the book. "But if I can't do magic-"

(Don't think about that.) Camila said, sharply. (You need to do your very best, and learn as much as you can.)

Lauren nodded, but she was still unsure.

(Study it everyday, and you'll be surprised at what you pick up.)

"Everyday…" Lauren whispered. She set the book on the table and reached for a pen and paper. She scribbled a study schedule for herself and set it on the desk.

"Everyday after work." Lauren said, with renewed confidence. "Without fail."

(Excellent.) Camila said. Lauren could clearly imagine her beaming. (You've studied a lot today already… maybe you should take the rest of the night off?)

Lauren shook her head. "After what I just did?"

(You'll wear yourself out.) Camila pointed out. (Or maybe just a break will do?)

"No… no, I need to study." Lauren said anxiously, as she looked over her other things. Her History, her Political, and her Literature books remained untouched.

She spent the rest of the night reading up on her History and Political works. She felt she had spent the most time on the Literature so far, and was determined to have a better understanding of the text.

Her History Studies led her past the Age of Dinosaurs and to the Age of Chaos. Demons ruled the world, wreaking havoc and forcing the surviving dinosaurs to their underground sanctuary of Astoria. Demons had little regard for history or culture, caring for nothing more than endless sex and violence. This lack of regard for history led this to being a bit of a Dark Age historically speaking. Very little was known about the monsters that walked the Earth around that time, until the Titan Kronus was overthrown by his son Zeus, which led to the Age of the gods.

But after centuries of infighting, the gods too fell, which led to the Age of Man. It was all so very fascinating… although the skeptical part of her wondered how much of it could be true. It seemed too fantastic to her, and was so radically different than what she had been taught in school that it gave her pause. She made a note to herself to discuss this with her professor… Acuzio, she thought his name was. The Dinosaur.

She found herself struggling a little bit more with Politics. She understood, somewhat, the relationship between the Noctis and Hellraisers, but most of the other topics went completely over her head. For example, she had heard from someone, she suspected Ophelia, that Merpeople worshipped either the Olympians, or the Great Old Ones. However, this book seemed to suggest that Merpeople all saw themselves as descendants of Poseidon, and thus thought of themselves as his descendants. From what she was reading here they seemed to worship Poseidon specifically, rather than the Gods as a whole, and the Great Old Ones weren't mentioned at all.

She found herself flipping through the book a lot compared to the others, comparing bits and pieces of information she had already picked up on to the text in the book. She was disappointed when she tried to find information on dinosaurs but found next to nothing. Apparently dinosaurs from Astoria were not allowed on the surface, and were hunted down on sight.

But Professor Acuzio was a dinosaur… right? Did he have a free pass? Confused, she turned her attention to werewolves. Werewolves, in comparison, had a very complex and bloody modern history. Every generation seemed to be rife with bloodlust, conflict, and infighting. It was very difficult for Werewolves, due to their nature, to protect themselves from their enemies. As a result they traditionally lived among people, and caused all sorts of problems within communities all over Europe.

It was all a little much for her to wrap her mind around. After a couple of hours of this she thought it was time to follow Camila's advice and take a break. She yawned, set the book aside, and stood up.

She glanced at herself in the mirror, and couldn't help but noticing how calm and happy she looked. She had never recovered from an emotional breakdown so quickly.

"Thank you… Camila…" She murmured, as she ran a hand over her cheek. She stared at herself for a while longer before turning her attention back to the rest of her day.

It was bed time. When she woke up she would begin her first entirely free weekend at Grey Arcadia. She had been looking forward to this all week, but now that it was here she had no real idea of what she wanted to do with it.

She wanted to study more, of course, but Camila had told her that she would need to take breaks. She cast a look at the door and felt a sense of emptiness.

She really did have nowhere to go. Merely going to the bookstore had been an ordeal to her. She would not be able to navigate the streets of Grey Arcadia and interact with other students or locals. She couldn't leave, either… She had nothing on the outside.

Was this room going to be the extent of her experience at Grey Arcadia?

She gripped the desk and leaned forward, staring at her reflection. No. That's what she had done in high school. Her Mother had made

sure to come and get her after school every day. She had never been allowed to spend time with friends or boys, as her parents felt that it would destroy her appeal to prospective wealthy husbands.

It was pathetic. She was eighteen and had never even been kissed.

(It's not pathetic.) Camila told her. (It's just how your life turned out. There's nothing to be ashamed of.)

She sighed and stroked her hair. She couldn't help but marvel at just how ugly she was. No one would ever take notice of her.

"But what should I do during my free time?" She asked.

(Well, anything you want.) Camila said, as if it were obvious. And to her, it probably was. To a normal person having fun with others was as simple as breathing. To her it was almost impossible. She could almost see Ophelia having dinner at some restaurant, surrounded by friends. The thought made her heart sink. That would never, ever be her…

(Remember what you thought before you came here?) Camila asked. (Remember how you thought that going to college would be impossible…?)

"I remember…" Lauren sighed, closing her eyes. "But- that's different-"

(No it's not.) Camila said. (I want you to look at the mirror again.)

Lauren opened her eyes and stared at her own reflection. Her eyes seemed blank, empty, and lifeless.

(You're looking at a brave girl who never, ever gave up on her dream.) Camila said. (But now it's time to have a new dream.)

"A… new dream…?"

She stared at herself for a moment longer. After that moment had passed, she looked away.

"I don't know what I want."

(Yet.) Camila said, gently. (You have your whole life ahead of you.)

Lauren felt herself starting to tear up.

“Camila…” She breathed. “You’re a good friend.”

She was sure that it was just her imagination, but she thought she saw her reflection smile.

Chapter 8

That weekend went by very slowly. Lauren spent it exactly as she had over the summer. Every day she would wake, serve The Master, and return to her room, where she would study for hours at a time. Once she was done, she would lay on her bed and rest for a moment, fantasizing about all the wonderful things she had just learned, before returning to work.

It was a routine that she found to be almost ideal: It was simple, relaxing, and pleasurable. She really did enjoy being alone, when all was said and done. How strange it was then, that her only real complaint about her life was that she was very lonely. She supposed that it was simply a case of the grass always being greener, and tried to pay it no mind.

She made no progress on her magic studies, but found herself increasingly enraptured by a number of stories from her literature book. She read stories of merpeople fighting off monsters in the deep, of Vampire Hunters on their quests to destroy specific targets, and the military exploits of the Order of the Dragon. She was beginning to see connections between these stories and real history. For example, the conflict between The Brides of Dracula and Amaris Yew led to radical changes in how the Noctis dealt with their enemies, such as the Hellraisers and The Order of the Dragon. The Brides of Dracula, the current rules of the Noctis, had a much more passive military policy than Dracula himself had. Amaris Yew had pushed for the Noctis to focus on purging the Hellraisers entirely, in hopes of preserving humanity and its culture, but her attempts at subverting the Brides rule led to her being thrown from power.

Amaris Yew was an interesting figure to her. She had already seen her name plastered all over the university, and had even seen a statue of her once. A little bit more investigation led her to realize that Amaris Yew had been an extremely well educated woman and

greatly valued Grey Arcadia as an institution of learning. She had made several generous donations to the University over the centuries, and in fact was heavily involved with founding it.

Lauren admired her. She found herself wondering what she was like. She had been thrown from power, but the book did not specify what that meant. She could very much still be alive, for all she knew.

It was odd to her to imagine Amaris Yew walking the streets of Grey Arcadia, like any other person. The more she read History, the more she began to notice that a lot of the more prominent names continued coming up, again and again, throughout history. The God Zeus reigned for thousands of years, and it shocked her how often the term 'Child of Zeus' appeared during material from the Age of the gods, regarding many of the most famous figures from that period.

The world was so complicated, but she was beginning to understand it. Just barely, but enough to give her a little boost of confidence when Monday came and she found herself trotting back to her Historia class.

Professor Acuzio greeted her cordially. Now that she was a little bit less apprehensive about the class itself, she found herself somewhat more intimidated by him than she had when they had first met. Teeth like his, she now knew, had torn through starspawn flesh, and his claws had torn straight through ships that had traveled the stars to arrive on this planet.

She again found herself sitting next to Li Zhou, the Chinese History student, and Zane, the swordsman. They both greeted her, but not warmly. Lauren suspected that she had not made the best impression to them during their first class.

Acuzio gave them a long lecture about the 'Golden' Age of the Primordial Era, as he called it. The Dinosaurs, he explained, developed their own culture on the planet's single continent, Pangaea. Their society was the simplest form of meritocracy: The strongest ruled. The strongest could destroy entire regions with their magic.

When the Starspawn came, they met worthy adversaries. Despite infesting every bit of the known universe, the Starspawn were unable, over a period of several million years, able to defeat the Dinosaurs. Their greatest and most powerful leaders, such as the Great Cathulu,, sealed themselves within the depths of the planet to protect themselves from the dinosaurs. The Dinosaurs followed them underground and slaughtered nearly all of them. Those that they could not kill were sealed away deep within the bowels of the Earth, away from all other life.

"Nonsense." Li Zhou whispered to herself, as Acuzio continued his lecture. Lauren turned to look at her, a little surprised. She was staring intently at Acuzio. Her fingers were clenched so tightly around her pencil that Lauren thought it might snap. Zane shot her a dirty look.

The lecture concluded with Acuzio acknowledging the common perception among most humans that dinosaurs had long gone extinct. "Our civilization is not as it once was. But over the past several thousand years we have begun reforging ties with those who live on the surface. It is my hope that someday, Man and Dinosaur will walk the Earth together. Until then, however… "

He gave out the assignment for the week. He wanted them to write a paper about a well known historical figure from the Age of Dinosaurs. Lauren found herself immediately worrying about who she would write about. The figures they had discussed in class, she was certain, would be the subject of most of the papers that would be turned in. She wanted hers to be a little bit different, a little bit more obscure.

She was flipping through her textbook trying to decide on her subject when Li Zhou stood up.

"You should start working on it when you get home." She said. She pointed downward. "Look."

Lauren looked upward and blanched. The vampire sitting in front of them had turned around to look at them. Her gaze was fixed squarely on Lauren.

“Her name is Goneril Blackbell..” Zane said, his voice quiet. “If you want to report her.”

Lauren found herself at a loss for words.

“W-why would I do that?” She stuttered. “She hasn’t done anything-“

“Yet.” Zane said, as he too got to his feet. “Come on. I’ll walk you both out.”

“Thank you, sir.” Li Zhou said quietly. “We really do appreciate it.”

They waited for Lauren to gather her things and they set off. Goneril’s eyes never leaving them.

“She’s like a cat.” Zane said, once they were out of the room. “Don’t allow yourself to be alone with her.”

“Noted.” Li Zhou said dryly.

They parted ways in the same spot they had before. Li Zhou and Zane bid her goodbye and went their separate ways. Lauren watched them go, feeling a little melancholy. They had gone out of their way to protect her. They didn’t particular like her or care about her, but they were there for her anyway.

Other people were wonderful. She thought bitterly, as she found herself walking back home alone. Other people had no problems making friends, or doing well on tests, or being on good terms with those around them. She had never have been able to do that. She didn’t have it in her. She couldn’t even take care of herself, let alone afford to give a passing concern to other people.

When she got back to her room, she spent her evening planning out her history essay. She had been told that she could write about any historical figure she wanted, so she spent a lot of time thinking about what she wanted to write about. In the end she decided on the noted female velociraptor Bioza. This dinosaur was credited as the founder of the symbiotic Astra parasite, which dinosaur warriors used to suspend their bodies between life and death to battle their enemies from beyond the stars with no fear of death or exhaustion.

Unfortunately, she lacked the information required to reasonably complete her paper.

At her old school she would use the computer for research purposes, but here in Grey Arcadia she wasn't sure where to get one. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen a single computer since she had arrived. There were none in her room, and she hadn't spent enough time outside of it to really know where they were. Or even if, indeed, there were any.

She'd either do the best she could with what she had… or she could head on back to the bookstore and pick up another book that specialized on the subject. The thought of that was daunting. She decided it was time to get a computer. Or at least, look around for one.

And so, to her very great unease, she found herself back on the streets of Grey Arcadia, searching for electronics. She knew enough about the town to have a general idea of where most of the stores were. But this was Grey Arcadia. Most of the places that were prominently placed were occult in nature. Witchcraft stores, fortune tellers, and psychic consultant agencies were the norm here. Something as ordinary as an electronics store would, in all likelihood, would not be here surrounded by the occult.

But then where she would find one? Where exactly could she go to find what she needed? She was completely at a loss. And so in the end she found herself back at the bookstore. This time she picked out a book on Dinosaur Historical figures, making doubly sure this time that it strongly featured information on Bioze, and the Astra Parasite. She was a little bit worried about pulling information from a single book, but it was all she could find on such short notice. She paid and left, heading back to her room. She immediately began work on the essay. The opinions she had initially had of Bioze, that she had been an ordinary warrior whose actions influenced countless generations, was unchanged. However, she was surprised at how this new book seemed to treat Bioze as a controversial figure. Her initial usage of the Astra parasite although initially somewhat

effective, eventually became obsolete as the dinosaurs evolved their battle strategies and technology.

But without those initial strategies, she argued, those new ones would never have developed in the first place. Bioze was one an innovator who had come from relatively humble origins.

She finished the first draft of the paper and set it aside for revision later. She stood up and looked around the room. Tomorrow would be her Occult Literature Class. She had been asked to read the Werewolf Romance *Lonely Nights.* She had already done so, but found herself reviewing the story just in case.

The next day, she found herself sitting in her literature class, feeling a tad bit nervous.. The barriers in between seats were still up, and she found herself alone. She found herself surprised at how nervous she felt. Zane and Li Zhou had been, strangely enough, somewhat of a comfort to her in her Historia Class. Here she had no one.

"That will be enough chatter." Galandra, their instructor said, as she strode up to the front. Lauren couldn't help but think she found her intimidating something about the way she looked and spoke made her feel as if she was very dangerous. She had not come across any stories about elves in her history classes. She really knew nothing about them.

Claire Luxiana was sitting in the front of the class, as she had been before, twirling a pen in between her fingers. She looked almost bored. The other girls in the room, however, looked excited.

"I am glad to see that you all have come in for our second session." Galandra said. "Now… let us get right into discussing *Lonely Nights."*

She leaned back into the table and what followed was an extremely enjoyable class in which they discussed the finer points of the piece. Lauren sat and listened as Galandra and the rest of the class discussed the story. She was surprised at how much she had overlooked. She had picked up on the general theme of overcoming an unstable romance, but had completely overlooked critical aspects of werewolf culture. The girl in the story had to restrain herself from

attacking potential threats to herself and her family, in order to keep the face that she was a werewolf a secret. For a werewolf, controlling oneself was an everyday struggle.

The entire ordeal made her feel very stupid. So much so that when they were dismissed and that they were told to read *Amaris Yew,* the next story in the collection, she felt a little apprehensive walking back to her room. She worked for a while before deciding to commit to reading the story. It was about a Vampire, and her rise and fall from power. She was sure that it was the same Amaris Yew whose name she had heard several times already.

Her Political Evils Class went comparatively smoothly. She sat, as he had the week before, in between Alriya Prince and Ellie Kennedy. They both greeted her cordially as she sat down. Ellie tried to engage her in conversation, but Lauren sat in silence as Professor Yin lectured them on the current state of the Hellraisers.

"The Hellraisers." She said. "Are violent, uncontrollable thugs who would burn down the entire world if they could."

"The World deserves to be burned down." Professor Yang said, taking over from her so seamlessly that Lauren couldn't even see the transformation. "To bring an end to human corruption and greed."

"To Hellraisers." Yin said, raising her voice somewhat. "Humanity's control over global affairs is unnatural, and needs to be purged. Cultures hundreds of millions of years old have found themselves kneeling to this relatively young species of upstarts, who in a few short centuries have conquered the planet, and continue to thrive and multiply."

It was an interesting lecture. The best she had gotten so far, she thought. She had never before heard someone argue in favor of the Hellraiser perspective.

"Humanity." Yang said. "Is in and of itself a plague. This Golden Age of prosperity is nothing more than a fluke, a relic of knowledge stolen from the gods…"

“Any civilization could be said to be a fluke.” Yin said. “You could argue the dinosaurs only ruled the Earth because they were so powerful. Or that the Age of Darkness began because only because of the Calamity. The fact remains that humanity rules this Earth, and as a result-“

“Humanity rules.” Yang said. “Because their predators need cattle.”

“Entire countries rise and fall due to human ambition.”

“That is nothing but theater.”

It was unlike any class she had ever taken: Both sides, from what she could take in, seemed to be adequately represented. They switch back and forth seamlessly to make their points to the class, and each other. It was more than simply informative: It was entertaining. Lauren could tell simply by watching her classmates how invested they were. They would smile and chuckle at certain points. Most importantly, she felt, she could for the first time observe Noctis and Hellraiser students side by side, and take notice of how they responded to each point raised.

She first took notice of the Witches. Noctis Witches tended to be much more elegantly dressed, usually in black cloaks and tall pointed black hats. They would also adorn their bodies with trinkets, usually earrings or necklaces, that marked them as being a servant of a particular Master.

Hellraiser Witches, in comparison, usually dressed much more provocatively with skin tight shorts and low cut tops. But there was, however, there seemed to be a good reason for this. Hellraisers were covered in rather intricate and beautiful tattoos. These were, she was sure, their way of showing who they belonged to.

She knew too little of specific Masters to identify the patterns and symbols, and turned her attention to the others in the room. The first thing she noticed was that there were a certain number of people that she could not identify as Hellraiser or Noctis. She had imagined that she had been the only one, but now that she took the

time to look around the room, she could clearly see others who were didn't seem to be aligned with either of the two primary powers.

Most obviously, were the girls sitting on either side of her. Neither Alriya Prince or Ellie Kennedy seemed to be aligned with either the Noctis or the Hellraisers. Alriya, Lauren knew, had come from an American military family. Ellie, she had told her, had been the product of a passionate night during a zombie outbreak, but Lauren didn't know enough about her to discern her alignment. She suspected that Ellie knew just as little about Grey Arcadia as she did. Every time Lauren looked at her she had the impression that she was just as lost as she was.

When the class ended the girls gathered up their things and walked out the door. This time Ellie and Alriya didn't speak to her at all, choosing instead to discuss the class. Lauren listened carefully, but said nothing.

"Both the Noctis and the Hellraisers are Evil." Alriya said flatly. "Neither can be trusted."

"There's good and bad in everyone, right?" Ellie asked. "What do you think, Lauren?"

She jumped. She hadn't been expecting to be addressed. She stared blankly at them as their eyes fell on her.

"I-I think I like the Noctis more…" She murmured, as she fingered her hair. "I mean… they want to take care of people… right?"

"For sustenance, yes." Alriya said, a little impatiently. "Were you not listening to Yang? We are like cattle to them. They cannot survive without humanity existing in great numbers."

"Oh…" Lauren said. She felt a little ashamed for being so stupid for a moment, before thinking a little more. Ophelia had been so nice to her. She certainly hadn't treated her like a cow. She felt a strong desire to argue her point further, to make her opinion known.

"Well, see you next week!" Ellie chirped, as she waved good bye to them. And then she was off, running along the sidewalk. Lauren

watched her go. She felt a little wistful. She knew what was about to happen.

“I don’t think I’ve heard you talk so often.” Alriya said. “You should do it more.”

Lauren stared at her feet on the sidewalk. Again, she felt ashamed. This time the feeling did not go away, because she knew that she was right. But there was nothing she could do about it. This was who she was.

“I will see you next week.” Alriya told her. She tipped her hand at her, and went her own way. Lauren tried quashing the rising feeling of dread and anxiety within her and began mentally preparing for the next day.

Tomorrow would be her Magic 101 class. She spent the whole night trying to read up on Magic, trying to find her own inner power. She felt nothing.

That feeling followed her all throughout the following day. She got out of bed, gathered her things, and left the Hall of Music. She was dreading her class for the day, right up until she stepped up to the front door.

“Oh, Lauren!”

She froze, her hand hovering over the handle. Her heart was racing.

“Glad I saw you.” Emilia Fenrir said brightly, as she jumped up the stairs behind her. The wolves that accompanied her every time she stepped up to the building disappearing into beautiful blue droplets. Lauren couldn’t breathe. She felt nauseous. “Let’s go inside, okay?”

Lauren did not look at her as she opened the door and stepped inside. Emilia followed her.

“Ready for class?” She asked. Lauren shook her head, unable to find her voice.

“Why not?”

Lauren swallowed.

“I’m…. not sure how well I’ll do.” She admitted. “I… I feel…”

She clutched her chest slightly, trying to silence herself. Emilia didn’t need to hear how she felt. She wouldn’t do anything. She didn’t care enough.

Lauren was right. Emilia immediately changed the subject.

“How was your week?” She asked, her voice kind. “Did you do anything fun?”

“No.” Lauren said quietly, as they came to the door. “I didn’t.” She felt a sense of revulsion within her. Not directed towards Emilia, but herself. Why couldn’t she just be normal?

They sat down and set their things on their desks. Lauren’s eyes immediately fell on Nightbyte Pippin. Once more she was swinging on her perch back and forth, eyes focused intently on the class.

“Welcome back, students.” Pippin said, as they took their seats. “A pleasure to see you all again, a pleasure…”

Lauren wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or horrified that they were not asked to perform actual magic in front of the class. Instead Pippin opted to speak at length about the process of finding own’s inner energy. Lauren sat, transfixed as Emilia nodded off beside her.

“Magic.” Pippin said. “Is rather stressful on the body. Using it extensively can wear and tear at you in ways that one cannot even begin to imagine. My belief is that for the aspiring mage, one must first know their limits.

Lauren rather felt she was limited by not being able to use magic at all more than anything else. Pippin went on to stress that self control was an essential part of being using magic, and that strong emotions could lead to disastrous accidents if one wasn’t careful.

Towards the end of the class, Lauren felt herself growing increasingly concerned. She had been aggressively pursuing the knowledge of how to use magic, but now she was certain that she would be too emotionally unstable to control it. Over the past couple of days she had been declining more and more… she could already

feel herself slipping back into her old habits. By the time the class ended she was feeling hopelessly depressed. She was beginning to fear that she would not be able to bring herself to come back to class next week.

"Is something wrong?" Emilia asked, as they walked to the front door together. Lauren shook her head.

"No…" She said quietly. "Nothing's wrong."

Emilia didn't look satisfied with her answer, but bid her goodbyes anyway. Lauren felt a little guilty: once again her personal problems drove away someone who was just trying to be nice to her.

Her second weekend of the semester went much the same as the first: She spent the entire time working and fretting over her lack of ability to use magic. She returned to the bookstore and picked up a new book. "Finding Your Energy." She poured over it, trying to puzzle through the problem. Once more, she felt as if she was making no progress, but she took solace in the fact that at least this time she had not picked up a book on magic tricks.

Every time she felt overwhelmed she read up on her other three classes. *Amaris Yew* was an autobiographical collection of the author's fondest memories. She couldn't say for certain whether or not this was the same Amaris Yew who she had read about the week before, as the author never specified her identity. It was rather philosophical and melancholy in nature, with the author reflecting on a number of profound conversations she had had throughout her life, usually with strangers.

Lauren didn't really understand it. There was a lot of talk about the nature of humanity and the inevitably of a fall from grace. She read through it twice, but found herself feeling increasingly confused.

She needed to think about this another way. Perhaps if she were able to confirm whether it not this was 'the' vampire Amaris Yew she would find herself more adequately able to understand her work.

Most of the stories in the book had a foreword explaining their origin and themes. *Amaris Yew* did not. It had a brief summation of the

events of the story, but nothing more. Lauren thought it rather odd. She flipped back through to *Lonely Nights,* and compared the two. *Lonely Nights* went into much more depth regarding the themes and ideas of the original author.

It was probably nothing, she told herself, as she put the finishing touches on her history paper. She was probably putting too much thought into it.

Next week began before she even realized it. Once more she, Li Zhou, and Zane sat together in the back of the classroom. Lauren was anxiously reading through her paper again, for the tenth time, certain that she would come across a spelling mistake or grammatical error. Li Zhou was quick to notice.

"I'm sure you did fine." She told her. "Your handwriting is beautiful."

Lauren was so taken aback that she didn't even thank her. Zane had his own paper out on the desk, and Lauren caught a glimpse of it.

"The Serpent…?" She murmured, unable to stop herself. Zane quickly moved his hand to cover up the paper. Lauren could feel Li Zhou stiffen behind her.

"That's what you did your paper on?" She asked, sounding a little disparaging.

"Yes." Zane said, his voice a little cold. "I did."

Li Zhou clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Lauren stared down at her own paper. She could feel the two of them staring intently at each other.

"May I ask." Zane said. "What the subject of your paper is?"

"Let's just say." Li Zhou said, her voice cold. "I found it rather difficult to write about a people that never existed."

Zane turned away from them, arms crossed. Li Zhou glowered at him and bent her head down to her desk.

"Excellent, excellent." Acuzio said joyfully, as he ruffled the papers on his desk. Lauren was amazed to see that his claws did not tear any of the papers in his grip.

They had another interesting discussion on the Dinosaurs, this time focusing on their decline from this Earth. Following a long string of invasions from alien invaders, the Dinosaur society collapsed when the entire planet was covered in an vast, endless darkness. Giant creatures were not able to survive, and quickly began to die off. This 'Age of Darkness' was the beginning of 'The Age Of Chaos.' In which millions of creatures, including aliens, demons, and the surviving dinosaurs fought over the planet. The Age of Chaos saw the rise and fall of some of the most dangerous figures in all of history, but was brought to an end when the Titan Kronos overthrew his Father Uranus, Son of the Earth and Chaos itself, and led the titans into a brief period of tranquility.

Lauren could not help but notice that Li Zhou was tapping her pen impatiently, staring intently at Acuzio. Lauren wanted to ask her what was going through her mind, but could not find the nerve. She looked annoyed about something.

Li Zhou and Zane were still angry at each other when they left the class together. Once again Goneril the Vampire tried to catch their eye, but this time Zane raised a crucifix as they passed. Her rather pleasant, inviting expression quickly melted into a bestial glare.

Li Zhou was in front of them. She came to a stop right outside the door, and Lauren almost found herself bumping into her. She turned back around and faced looked past her, towards Zane.

"Yes?" He asked coolly. Lauren was alarmed to see that he had a hand placed on one of his swords.

If Li Zhou was bothered by this, she didn't show it.

"Please." She said. "Sir Knight. I know you don't want to believe it, but I know it's true. There is no Serpent."

"You are very naïve." Zane said coldly. And without another word her turned and left.

Lauren was at a complete loss for words. She looked at Li Zhou, half wanting to comfort her or reassure her. But she seemed somehow cold and distant.

“I know.” She said. “I shouldn’t be picking fights with our bodyguard, but…”

She shook her head and sighed. She seemed somehow despondent. Feeling a little sorry for her, Lauren decided to walk with her. Lauren walked with her down the stairs and to the front door.

“Tell me, Lauren.” Li Zhou said. “What do you believe?”

“Believe?”

“What’s important to you?” Li Zhou asked. “More than anything?”

Lauren didn’t even really have to think about it.

“I want to be normal.” She answered. “It’s all I ever really think about.”

Li Zhou laughed, and shook her head again. But she was smiling.

“Ever since I was a little girl.” Li Zhou began. “I’ve been fascinated with history. I read books from all over the world regarding the subject. Anything I could get my hands on… I was reading contraband material before I was ten. I could have been killed for some of the things I was learning about.”

Lauren wasn’t sure what to say, but she wanted to listen.

“It was not long.” Li Zhou said. “That I began to realize how contradictory and self serving all of these texts could be. None of them were interested in telling the truth: They were always pushing some agenda, or ideology, or religion. None of it was real.”

Their eyes met, and Lauren was a little taken aback to see that was crying.

“I’m sorry.” She said. “I’m just a little upset.”

She bent her head and walked away, covering her face with her hand. Lauren watched her go, feeling a little forlorn.

(You’re not the only one struggling)

Chapter 9

She was still feeling somewhat down when she made her way into her Occult Literature Class. She sat down by herself and watched as Galandra sat at her desk, scribbling something on a piece of paper. She did not look up at them until class began.

"Welcome, class." Galandra stand, standing up to her full height. She walked across the desk and leaned up against it. "I hope that you find yourselves well…"

Her eyes were so penetrating, Lauren felt herself feeling intimidated every time she even glanced her way.

"Last week." Galandra said. "I asked you all to read up *Amaris Yew.* What did you all think of it?"

The entire class was completely silent. A whole range of thoughts ran through Lauren's mind. She thought of how Amaris reflected on her relationship with the people around her, her obsession with power and success, and her belief that someday the world itself will come to an end.

But she said nothing. She was certain that her opinion on the piece was naïve and stupid. Someone like Galandra would never care what she had to say.

"No one?" Galandra asked, sounding a little disgusted. "Cowards, all of you."

The vast majority of the group below them stirred. Both Noctis and Hellraisers seemed rather put off by these words. Those unaligned with either sat impassively.

"The Noctis." Galandra said. "Would have lived and died by Amaris Yew's words just a few decades ago. And the Hellraisers would have done anything to destroy her. Look at you both now."

One of the boys sitting up front, a black haired one so thin and frail that Lauren had initially believed him to be a girl, let out an animal like hiss, his cat like ears folded back. Galandra waved her hand and a splash of water erupted from it, soaking him completely. In less awkward circumstances it likely would have gotten a laugh out of the class, but the room was deadly silent.

“I will remind you all that this is my classroom.” Galandra said. “You will listen to what I have to say, and listen well.”

This was completely different than last week’s discussion. Galandra had spoken about Lonely Nights as if she were completely disinterested, even bored. Lauren had assumed that she had given the same lecture hundreds and thousands of times over the years that she had simply grown tired of it, but she had been wrong. There was something more here.

“I have lived through the rise and fall of all of your most glorious civilizations.” Galandra said. “Those figures you are taught to revere as children were nothing but ants. The Fair Folk have created a utopia that has existed since the dawn of time, while you lesser creatures fight over the Earth itself.”

One of the Witches with the large wide hats set a pencil standing upright on her table and tapped it with her finger. A bright, brilliant flame shot up from it. Other Noctis witches were quick to follow suit, but they said nothing.

“Amaris Yew.” Galandra said. “Was a foolish woman who failed to lead her people into prosperity. She involved herself too much with the affairs of humans, and suffered the price for it. Today the Empire she built crumbles, beset on all sides and from within by her enemies.”

The Hellraisers in front of her let out unexpected whoops and holler. One boy even jumped up and did a little dance. Galandra waved her hand, and the boy suddenly fell, slamming his head onto the stone floor in front of the desk. Lauren screamed, hands over her mouth. Galandra shot her a dark look as the boy got up and wobbled back to his seat, blood gushing from his head.

“And yet you Hellraisers.” Galandra said. “Were forced to kneel before this woman.”

The laughter, which had continued in spite of the boy being brought to heel, suddenly stopped. Lauren heard a rustle behind her, and a deep voice rung out.

“You have a very Hellraiser perspective.”

Lauren turned.

Sitting behind her, a little to her left, was a rather ordinary looking boy. He was tall and fair, with light blonde hair that fell almost across his eyes.

His eyes though… they were a beautiful bright blue that seemed almost hypnotic.

“I do not.” Galandra said. “I am above your petty squabbles-“

“Your view.” The boy said, his voice calm and relaxed. “Is that Amaris Yew is superior to the Hellraisers due to her perceived victory over us. In turn, you believe that Amaris Yew is weak for being driven from power.” His voice and tone was firm, but relaxed.

Lauren stared, enraptured. His voice was so calm and soothing. It was the first time she had heard someone, anyone, articulately explain the Hellraiser philosophy.

“You think that is all I believe?” Galandra asked disparagingly.

“Life.” The boy said. “Is not so complex as Gods or Elves make it out to be. Your immortality has blinded you.”

“You, on the other hand… live for a brief period, breed, and then die.” Galandra said. “You know nothing.”

“All Elves are ignorant.” He said. “You know nothing of death… and so, you cannot understand true power.”

Galandra looked very angry now. Her hair was billowing slightly, a sure sign that she was considering unleashing more magic. But the boy sat impassively, staring directly at her, unmoving.

“I am Christopher Damon.” He said. “As I am sure you were wondering.”

He turned his head downward and met Lauren’s eyes. She jolted back around, biting her lip. She brushed her hair with her fingers as she looked back down at Galandra.

She was still glaring at Damon. He had, it seemed, completely derailed the conversation, and the lecture.

“Hellraisers always win, baby!” Another boy in the crowd cackled.

Christopher Damon sat impassively, his eyes never leaving Galandra as the Hellraisers around them cheered and danced, while their Noctis counterparts sat unmoving. Galandra was looking increasingly frustrated.

“ENOUGH!” She shouted. The power of her voice, magically amplified, drowned out the jeers for the briefest of moments. But the magic that had once cowed her classroom into silence did not stop the cries of jubilation from the dancing students.

“Class Dismissed!” Galandra snapped, as she turned on her heel and stomped off. She opened the door and slammed it behind her. Lauren barely managed to grasp the situation when someone touched her shoulder.

She jumped, turning her head to find Christopher Damon’s bright blue eyes staring into hers.

“She let down the barriers.” He said quietly. “This place is about to become a battlefield.”

It took Lauren a while to understand what he meant. One of the Hellraisers, a girl with bright red hair that fell down to her waist, had gotten on top of the desks and walked across it, kicking things haphazardly towards the nearest students. As most of the Hellraisers were up dancing and chanting in latin languages, most of this hit the Noctis students, or some of the few non affiliates.

A bottle of what seemed like a brand of tea went spilling out onto a witch and her things. She let out a furious scream and got to her feet. She grabbed the dancing girl’s leg and send her sprawling: one of the fiery pencils that had been set alight penetrated her thigh. She let out an animal like screech, and clawed at the Noctis Witch as she closed in.

“Let’s go.” Damon whispered, as he took her hand and led her out of the door. The black haired boy that had been sitting in front of

Lauren turned around and bared his fangs at them. Damon raised his hand and slapped him aside, sending him tumbling to the ground. Behind him Lauren could see Claire Luxiana twirling on the spot, vanishing into thin air.

"Always carry a big stick." He murmured, as he led her down the stairs towards the door. Lauren could hear frantic cries and outbursts behind her: It sounded like a fight had broken out. She closed her eyes, wishing that it would end.

She didn't open them again until the door slammed shut behind her. She instinctively pushed her back against the wall and sighed. When she finally opened her eyes Damon was standing right in front of her, looking at her.

"You aren't hurt." He said. He had not let go of her hand. "Good."

Lauren stared down at their feet. They seemed barely an inch apart. She had never been so close to a boy in her life. She felt her face going red.

"I… thank you." She said. "Sir."

"Don't mention it." Damon said. He let go of her hand and turned around. He had only walked about five steps before turning his head back around.

"Don't forget your reading assignment this week." He said. "Galandra will try and hold this against us."

Lauren wanted to ask him to wait, to explain what had just happened, but she couldn't find the words.

He turned back around and was gone.

Lauren couldn't stop thinking about him that entire night. She reviewed her history notes and text, as much as she was able, but she always found herself thinking back to how their eyes had met. How electrifying it had been.

The next day she found herself once again sitting in between Alriya and Ellie, watching the crowd laugh and jeer at the Professor antics. It was, she noted, completely different than what had happened in

Galandra's class. Galandra had attacked both the Noctis and the Hellraisers and antagonized both. The Professor made the conflict between them seem interesting and fun. And above all, amiable.

"You seem happy today." Ellie told her, as the class ended and the three of them walked out."Did something happen?"

"Huh?" Lauren was taken aback. "No… nothing."

"Then why have you been smiling to yourself all day?"

She blushed, turning her head downward. She had been thinking of Damon.

"No…" Ellie said, the clear sign of obvious glee in her voice. "You've *met* someone!"

Lauren let out a wail and covered her face in her hands. Ellie burst out laughing, and Lauren was sure that even Alriya allowed a small smile.

"I never would have expected this from you, Lauren." Ellie said, wrapping an arm around her. Lauren found herself flinching from the unexpected contact. "Here I thought you were a shy little girl, but really…"

"Leave her alone, Ellie." Alriya said.

Lauren was the first to leave them that day, still red faced. She was embarrassed… but she had to admit, now that it was over, the memory of it made her smile too.

The next day she met Emilia in front of the Magic building again, and this time she found herself in much higher spirits. Once more she sat through another lecture on proper usage of magic, its practical usage, and warnings of how it can be abused.

When class ended, Lauren found herself a little taken aback at how quickly the week had gone by, and how easy it had been for her.

"See you next week, Lauren." Emilia said brightly, once they hit the street. She dashed off at a sprint, far faster than she would have thought possible, nearly barreling over by a couple of passerby beastmen, a wolf and a golden retriever.

“Watch it, Pup!” The wolf snarled, its fangs bared. Emilia smiled widely at it as she passed them by. They were still muttering to themselves as they walked by, casting her dark looks.

Lauren supposed this was why she could never really be friends with someone like Emilia: She was too outgoing, too confident, too friendly. Emilia may not mind being around someone like her, who was naturally shy and quiet, but she certainly felt eyes trailing after them as Emilia loudly went about her day.

Emilia was such a nice person, Lauren thought. But she didn’t feel as if they would ever really be friends. The thought was somewhat depressing.

She spent that weekend working, as she had before. But this time she felt herself feel somewhat distracted. She kept thinking back to her Literature Class, and every time she did her heart started to race. She couldn’t wait to go back.

Li Zhou greeted her cordially when she arrived at her Historia Class, as did Zane. They did not, however, acknowledge each other. The atmosphere was rather thick and oppressive: Lauren felt almost glad when Acuzio came up to them holding up their graded papers.

“Zane?” He said. He set the paper on his desk. “I appreciate the effort you put into your paper. It was very well researched. I enjoyed reading it.”

“Thank you.” Zane said quietly, as he glanced over his grade. Lauren caught a glimpse of his grade, a 93%.

“Ah, Lauren Frey.” Acuzio said, as he ruffled through the papers. “Reading your paper I had the impression that you grew up unaware of Historia… is that right?”

“Well, uh, yes.” Lauren said, surprised.

“I could tell that you put a lot of heart into it.” Acuzio said, as he set the paper down on the table. “I expect great things from you going forward.”

“Oh… thank you, sir.” Lauren said. She glanced down at her paper and felt her heart soar. 89%. Acuzio had written some choice comments on the bottom of the page, and she was busy reading through them as he moved past her.

“Ah, Li Zhou.” He said. “You have interesting ideas, but unfortunately…”

He set the paper down on her desk. Lauren glanced over and saw a big, red 0% scrawled out at the top of the page.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have tried to argue that the Primordials never existed when one is grading your papers.”

Li Zhou glared up at him hatefully as he moved on. Lauren watched him approach the girl sitting on Li Zhou’s other side, who seemed to have focused her paper on the Starspawn as a collective, rather than individuals. Acuzio was giving some choice suggestions to her about the historical inaccuracies from the sources she had used as Lauren took notice of just how upset Li Zhou seemed.

“Li Zhou…” Lauren said quietly, as she touched her arm. Li Zhou jerked away from her and stuffed the paper out of sight. She didn’t look at her throughout the entire rest of the session, and when class ended she was the first out of the door. She was so anxious to leave that she did not even wait to be escorted.

“I hope she’ll be okay.” Lauren said anxiously, as she watched the vampire Goneril’s eyes follow Li Zhou as she passed by.

“She will be.” Zane assured her. “Ready to leave?”

“I… yes.”

They gathered their things and stood up. Lauren felt her face go red as Goneril winked at her. Zane protectively opened his cloak and shielded her from view.

“Is it true what Acuzio said?” Zane asked. “That you grew up ignorant of Historia?”

“I… yes.” Lauren said. “People outside of Grey Arcadia don’t really talk about it… We only discuss humanity’s history.”

“And yet you came here.” Zane said. “Is there a reason?”

Lauren sighed.

“I had no where else to go.” She said, a little bit gloomily. “I came here because no one else would have me.”

“I see.” Zane said. “But you’re a believer?”

“I don’t believe anything.” Lauren said. “I just… wrote about a subject that we covered. That’s all.”

“Hm.” Zane said. He seemed to be considering her carefully. “I can see why that vampire is so taken with you.”

“Huh?”

“You’re pure.” He said. “Creatures like that… and pagans, I suppose… believe that people with your kind of innocence hold precious spiritual qualities.”

Lauren wasn’t sure what to say. It seemed like rather an out of nowhere observation of her character. She had paid very little attention to Zane so far, finding him cold and aloof, but it seemed he had been paying very good attention to her. She felt a little guilty, that she hadn’t been kinder to him.

“People like you.” Zane said. “Are in very great danger at this University.”

Lauren stared at him. She felt anxious, somehow.

“Danger?” She repeated. “I-“

“I will not tell you what to believe.” Zane said. “You Americans value your freedom, after all. But I will give you a warning. It is perhaps in your best interest to not trust Li Zhou.”

“Not trust…” Lauren repeated. “Li Zhou…?”

“She is.” Zane said. “A member of a cult that believes that the Primordials never existed. She thinks they’re simply underground lizards that prey on human flesh.”

“But that’s ridiculous.” Lauren said. She hesitated. “Isn’t it?”

"I think so." Zane said. "And I daresay the vast majority of this faculty agrees… regardless of alignment." He gave her a dark look.

"But she thinks herself enlightened." He said. "She believes in the teachings that have been beaten into her since birth, and likely values them more than her own life."

Lauren recalled the words she had said on that day, in orientation. "I want to learn about the True History of the world."

"The fact that she is so brazen about her views." Zane said. "Suggests that she is some kind of subversive agent, hoping to infiltrate and influence academia."

"This is…. a little much." Lauren admitted. "I… don't know what to think."

"Please don't worry about it too much." Zane reassured her. "I am asking you to take care of yourself, nothing more."

It hadn't been that long ago that they had all been going to class together in harmony. Lauren thought bitterly. She had her own misgivings about her own role in their little circle, but she had been begun feeling rather fond of Li Zhou over the past few weeks. The fact that she and Zane were fighting distressed her.

She spent too much time thinking about how to resolve the conflict between them that night. In the end, she was forced to conclude that there was nothing she could do. They would either have to work it out themselves… or continue their little feud.

It took her a while to realize that she had let herself be distracted: she reviewed her Occult Literature reading went to bed. The next day, she found herself sitting back in the Occult Literature class, nervously watching Galandra.

Half of the class seemed to not be there: The rows of seats were surprisingly empty. She was relieved to see that Christopher Damon had returned: he had smiled at her when she came into the room. Claire Luxiana, however, had not.

“I have been asked.” Galandra said, as she paced in front of the row of desks. “To apologize for what transpired last week.”

“Don’t worry.” Damon said lazily. “Failure is only human.”

Lauren jumped. The burst of magical energy erupting from Galandra was so powerful that it shattered the windows.

“Today.” Galandra said. “We will be discussing-“

Her tone was a lot more restrained than it had been before. It focused more on the topic, rather than Galandra’s ideas. It was, in Lauren’s mind, a much more satisfactory lesson, but an uneventful one.

When class ended, Galandra was the first out of the classroom: Again she slammed the door behind her so roughly that the walls rattled.

“She’s not happy.” Christopher said casually. He was leaning up against the barrier of light that was meant to protect Lauren from the students around her. “What’d you do?”

She started.

“Me?” She spluttered. “I didn’t do anything-“

He was laughing at her. She felt her face flush, and she looked down at the ground. She liked the sound of his laugh.

“So Lauren Frey.” Christopher said. “May I come in?”

“Huh?”

“The barrier.” He said patiently. “You can invite me in if you want.”

“S-sure…”

The barrier suddenly became somewhat less pronounced, and he slid over to her and sat on her desk, staring down at her. She felt extremely nervous, but also a strange sense of excitement. She fingered her hair and smoothed out her clothes, hoping desperately that she looked presentable.

“Our instructor.” Christopher said. “Hasn’t done a very good job teaching us.”

This wasn't the conversation that Lauren had hoped would transpire.

"You think so?"

"The instant I questioned her ideas." He said. "She got uppity with me. Do you know why?"

Lauren shook her head.

"Elves." Christopher said. "Are a vain, egotistical people. They believe that all art and culture has roots with their civilization. Their King Oberon, and his wife Titania, have ruled since the dawn of time. Their people have never known hard times or change."

He smiled.

"They're nothing like you."

Lauren took in a sharp intake of air. She placed a hand over her heart and stared up at him. Someone… there was someone who understood her.

"Come with me." Christopher cajoled. "I want to show you Grey Arcadia."

He held out his hand to her and she took it, trembling somewhat. He smiled at her and led her down the steps.

They stepped out into the hall and onto the street, hand and hand. Lauren felt like her heart might explode. She had never, in her entire life, had her hand held by anyone. Even her parents had made her sort of clutch onto the back of their sleeves when they dragged her around on their excursions.

"You should never hold hands with anyone other than the man who is going to be your husband." Her Mother had explained to her once.

Was that what was happening now? Was it possible… Did Christopher actually…

Like….

Her….?

Her heart was rapidly thumping in her chest as Christopher Damon squeezed her hand. She hoped that he would never let go.

“Grey Arcadia is the best college campus in the world.” Christopher said. “Oh, more ordinary schools may deny it, of course, but none of them offer what Grey Arcadia offers.”

“Like what?”

“Why, all sorts of things.” He answered. “For example… for the vast majority of the population, it is impossible to ever be exposed to the magical arts. Magic is not a practice than can simply be learned and practiced over the internet. It is a culture, a way of life that one cannot take part in which they throw themselves in wholeheartedly. In your case…”

He paused, giving her a quick once over.

“We would never have met if it hadn’t been for this University.” He said. She went bright red, her eyes darting away from his.

“People like you and I.” He said. “Would never cross paths if it weren’t for this university. We would know nothing of the enemy of humanity, the Fair Folk.”

“I still know nothing.” Lauren said quietly. “All of those things you said… were they true?”

“Every word.” He said. “Galandra is a fool. A very old fool, to be sure, but a fool none the less. She has known nothing but an eternal life. She, like all elves, does not understand that all things must someday die.”

They were walking down the street, hand in hand. Lauren was listening enraptured to every word. He was smart, she thought. He knew so much more than she did. The realization made her feel even more attracted to him.

“Most people would think of immortality as being a blessing.” Lauren said. “Are you suggesting it’s not?”

“Of course.” Said he. “You have seen how she sneers at those she considers lesser than her… to her eye, we are nothing more than insects. The decisions we make and the ideas we have don’t

influence our culture or our lives at all, in her mind. Ah, we are here."

He stopped. Staring up at the sign above their heads. It was a young lady, completely white in color and naked, lying sprawled on the words **Korova Milk Bar.**

"Come, devotchka." He said. "The Moloko here is very horrorshow."

She bit back the uneasy feeling in her stomach: she had not gone to a restaurant or bar on her own since coming to Grey Arcadia. She had avoided such places, initially due to financial concerns, but eventually due to a simple lack of wanting to surround herself with strange people to eat food that she wasn't sure that she would like. Nevertheless, she found herself being pulled inside regardless.

She had to stop herself from gasping at the interior. Milky white tables designed to resemble naked woman stood standing in a kind of bridge position using their hands and feet as stands. The dimly lit room led to a moody atmosphere, making the few that sat around conversing with one another come off as very intimidating. Large men in tight white outfits stood with their arms crossed, seemingly on the lookout for any trouble.

"Don't be afraid." Damon told her. He led her to a quiet, lonely corner and they sat down. It was like he had read her mind.

"What is this place?"

"A Milk bar." He said. "You have never been to one?"

"No, never." She said, a little bit anxiously. "Uh, it is ordinary milk… isn't it?"

"If you want it to be." Damon said, sounding very much amused. "But you might consider something with a little bit more punch."

She stared blankly at him.

"You like school." Damon said. "So how about something that will help your mind?"

A ghost taking the form of a young girl in a maid uniform appeared in front of them, floating above the ground.

“Master…” She murmured. “A pleasure to see you again…”

“A pleasure.” Damon returned. “The lady would like Milk Memory. I would like the Milky Way.”

“Aaaaah….” The ghost turned to her. Lauren flinched. Her eyes were a lot more empty and haunting than most other ghosts she had seen. She knew little about ghosts, but understood that they too could be very dangerous. “Is this the Lady’s first visit to Korova?”

“Yes.” Damon answered. “She is my guest.”

“I am required by the university to inform her of the risks of ingesting our milk.” She said. “Milk can offer health benefits to humans… but used irresponsibly can lead to disaster.”

“I’ll take responsibility for her.” Damon said casually, leaning back in his chair. “A shot of Milk Memory won’t ruin her mind.”

“Very well.” The maid said. She bowed to them, and then disappeared.

“Milk is dangerous?”

“The Milk here can be.” He said. “They serve a wide range of clients… not all of them human. Milk Memory is perfectly suitable for girls such as yourself, however.”

Ophelia had said something similar about tea houses and alcohol. But she had not ordered for her without consulting her first. Lauren wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“Milk Memory will do you a lot of good.” He said.

The ghost returned rather quicky, two bottles of milk in hand. They were rather different in color: Lauren’s was a rather murky grey, while Damon’s was a pure white.

“People don’t drink it for the taste.” He warned her, as she reluctantly prodded at the glass with her finger. “It’s for the health benefits.”

“What… exactly?”

“It kicks in immediately.” He told her. “Drink it.”

She raised the glass to her lips and drank. She had to stop herself from gagging: It tasted rancid. She swallowed, shuddering a little as it slid down her throat. It tasted odd.

And then she felt her head sting. She raised her finger to her head, a little taken aback.

"Tell me." Damon said. "What was the first thing that Galandra told us in class?" She didn't even need to consider the question.

"She told us that she would teach us about the best literature mortals had ever produced." She said. She gave a start, touching her head. The instant he had asked her the question, the image of that day had appeared in her mind… as brilliant and vivid as if it had just happened.

"And she was quite condescending about it too." Damon said, a little bit amused. "I see that you're already experiencing the effects."

"What… is happening to me?"

"Memory Milk." He said. "Is a method to improve recollection of past events. Anything you have seen or take notice of will appear vividly in your mind, for several hours after ingestion."

He leaned forward.

"Want to try it out again?"

She nodded, leaning closer to him.

"How many students were in our Occult Literature Class at the start of the semester?"

Lauren had no idea. She had never bothered to count, or had seen any official figure. But she could see that room, clear as day in her mind. She had looked out over the heads of the class taking them all in that entire session. She could see them again now. So clearly, in fact, that she was able to count them out.

"I saw twenty eight." She said. "Uh, if my memory is accurate."

"It is." Damon assured her. "I counted out twenty eight as well." He paused. "And the next week?"

“Twenty four.”

And last week?

“Twenty…”

“And this week it was down to twelve.” Damon said. “After the fight that broke out in class. A fight that Galandra allowed to happen, since she lowered the barriers to prevent fighting among the alignments.”

“Why are so many people dropping the class?” Lauren asked.

“Why do you think?” Damon answered. “She’s an awful teacher.”

“I felt like I was learning a lot.” Lauren said, a little surprised.

Damon looked at her for a moment, and Lauren was sure that he was about to reprimand her. Instead he simply spoke again.

“You’ve never been exposed to this side of the world.” He said. “You came here with no understanding of the culture here or our politics. You came here a complete blank slate, desperate to escape your life. Am I wrong?”

Lauren gasped, clutching her hand with her mouth. She stared at him with wide eyes. It had not been her imagination. He really did understand her. Better than anyone else she had ever met. Even Ophelia, kind as she was, had not been able to see through her this way.

“No.” She said. “You’re… absolutely right.” She remembered how she had felt when she had first met Ophelia. How Ophelia had, more than anyone she had met in her life, had made her feel welcome in this strange hew environment. But although she had been gracious and kind, there was a kind of barrier between them. Lauren had felt very fond of her, but had known from the onset that Ophelia would never want to see her again.

But Damon though… he did not look as if he were judging her position in life at all. It seemed to go beyond that.

“Lauren.” Damon said, his unblinking eyes staring deep into her own. “The reason you don’t mind what Galandra is doing is because you

are so eager to learn."

She closed her eyes. It was incredible. She had been so nervous about going along with Damon, going into this bar, and having a drink with him. But she felt comfortable and safe: More so than she had been since first arriving at the Hall of Music.

"You seem happy." Damon said. "Happier than I've ever seen you."

"What makes you say that?"

"I've never seen you smile."

She laughed.

They spent about an hour sitting around talking. About Galandra, about the University, and about the stories they had studied so far. And soon, Lauren felt comfortable enough to ask him questions.

"I don't understand the Hellraisers." She said.

"Have you ever spoken to one?" He asked.

"Before you, never."

He smiled softly, and she felt her heart race.

"Hellraisers." He said. "Believe in absolute freedom. A being, mortal or god, needs to feel a sense of agency in their own lives to feel truly content and alive."

"Freedom… from what?"

"Anything that could restrain us from doing what we would want to do." Damon said. "For example… suggest you and I wanted to get married."

Lauren felt her face go completely red.

'But your parents wouldn't allow it." He said. "What would we do?"

"We would…. Have to wait…" She paused. "Come to a decision on what to do. Wouldn't we?"

"Or." Damon said gently. "We could just do it."

"She stared at him.

“A marriage is a union between a man and a woman.” Damon said. “Their parents should raise them as best as they can, of course… but in the end the only way one can find another is by their own will.”

Lauren clutched her upper chest, deep in thought.

“You’re saying… we should decide for ourselves what we want.”

He smiled at her, and she felt her heart soar.

He paid for their drinks and they stood up.

“I want to bring you back here.” Damon said. “Next week?”

“I… yes.” Lauren said. “I… would like that very much!”

They bid they good-byes and went their separate ways. She went home in very high spirits, higher, she thought, than she had ever felt before. She found it very difficult to study, her mind drifting to the day. It was, she was certain, the best day she had had since first meeting Ophelia, on her very first day at Grey Arcadia.

Her good mood carried her through the rest of the night: Things were finally starting to look up. She had met another person that liked her: and that was more than she had ever really expected.

Chapter 10

“So things are going well with your boyfriend?”

“What?” Lauren gave a small start.

“You’ve been smiling all day.” Ellie noticed. “You seem really happy.”

Alriya yawned. She didn’t seem as enthusiastic about Lauren’s personal life as Ellie was.

“I wouldn’t call him my boyfriend-“ Lauren began, but was cut off by the Professor raising her voice.

“Alright, class. Settle down, settle down…”

The three of them sat in silence as they took in the lecture.

“Hellraisers and Noctis.” Professor Yin said. “Are like cats and dogs.”

“What a simplistic way of putting it.” Professor Yang said dryly, causing the class to laugh. It was a little moment, but it made her

think.

“Forgive me.” She said to the others, as they began to walk out of the classroom. “Which do you support? The Hellraisers, or the Noctis?”

Alriya gave her a sharp, critical look. “Neither. Both are toxic to humanity.”

“Same.” Ellie agreed, swinging her arm back to side. “We’re on enemy territory, Lauren. Both sides hate us.”

“Is… is that really true?” She asked, looking between them. She thought back over the past couple of weeks. To Ophelia, and to Damon. She felt far more comfortable here than she ever had at home.

Alriya touched her arm.

“Nothing could be more true.” She said. “Lauren, I do not wish to meddle in your affairs… but you must understand this. The politics of this university mean little outside of it. Students who hate each other are forced into classes together to put forward an illusion of togetherness and peace…. But once they graduate, they will be tearing each other apart.”

“They tear themselves apart here.” Ellie noted. “I’ve seen fights on the street already. They tend to escalate more and more going into the fall season.”

“Nonetheless, you mustn’t think you need to align yourself with one side or the other, for favors or for any other reason.” Alriya said. “For a human, the best thing to do is get an education, and then to get out.”

Lauren had been too intimidated to ask more questions. She was sure that if she told Alriya that she had an interest in a Hellraiser boy, she would jump down her throat. So she stayed quiet. She wished she had gotten an answer to her unspoken question…. Whether or not every Hellraiser was dangerous.

She expected to find Emilia waiting for her in front of the Magic building again, but was surprised when she didn't show. She waited for ten minutes or so, but she still had not appeared. For the first time, she found herself walking up to the Magic 101 room alone and sitting down.

There was a change in atmosphere today. Lauren couldn't quite figure out what it was. Pippin was the same as ever, swinging back and forth on her perch, demonstrating magical abilities and describing methods to improve. It was the class that had changed.

Previously they had given her a wide berth. But now she noticed more people casting looks her way. She was sure that they too noticed Emilia's absence. She was surprised at how relieved a lot of them looked. A couple of boys that she thought must be members of the Order of the Dragon due to the serpent like depictions on their armbands kept glancing up at her. She ignored them, focusing on her work.

"Lauren, a moment." Pippin said, as she gathered her things to leave.

"Y-yes?" Lauren was sure that she had done something wrong.

"Forgive me for asking, but do you know where Emilia Fenrir lives?" Pippin asked. "I'd like her to do some out of class reading, as she couldn't make it to class today."

"Oh…" Lauren cast her eyes downward. "No, I don't. I'm sorry."

"Please don't be." Pippin said. "I thought she had asked you to be her designee, but…"

She waved Lauren away with a bat like claw, and Lauren found herself walking home alone. Now that it was the weekend, she had three whole days to prepare for the next week. During those three days, however, she found her mind drifting off more and more. All of the events of the past week, from her talk with Li Zhou, to her meeting with Damon, to Emilia's sudden disappearance ran through her mind.

It was kind of distressing, she thought. There was so much going on, between Li Zhou and Zane, and Galandra and Damon… and she really didn't know what to make of any of it. In a way it was no different than what she had experienced in high school. The people around her lived ordinary, interesting lives, had goals and ambitions, and ideas about the world.

What did she have? Nothing. If things kept going down this path, college would just be a repeat of high school. Coming home alone, every day.

She gripped her pen so hard it began to bend. She sighed, closed her eyes and tried to relax. No… things were different now. She didn't have friends, not exactly… but already there were people that she had regularly been around, and quite liked. And Damon had even invited her to go somewhere with him…

She relaxed the grip on her pen. No… she was happier now than she had been in a long, long time. She had never expected that all of her problems would disappear overnight…. When had she ever spent so much time alone with a boy?

She needed to stop panicking. She needed to focus, and prepare herself for the week ahead.

"Hello." Lauren said, as she sat down next to Zane in their history class.

"Hello." He returned cordially. "Have you seen Li Zhou?"

"I have not." Lauren said, a little bit surprised. She had been running a little bit late… she had taken a little bit more time than usual to get ready. She had expected Li Zhou to be here already.

"Hm." Zane said, casting his eye around the room. His eyes fell on Goneril for a second, who was happily chatting with another vampire, and then onto Acuzio, who was standing at the desk in the front of the room, shuffling through papers.

Li Zhou never appeared. Lauren sat through the entire class listening to Acuzio describe the end of the age of Chaos and the rise of Olympus. She kept casting worried glances at the door.

When the class ended she and Zane stood up and he escorted her out.

“Where is she?” Lauren asked him, as they stepped through the door. Zane’s expression as unreadable.

“Hopefully.” He said. “She only dropped out. Otherwise…. I fear for her life.”

He cast a dark look behind them. “That Raptor could have done it.”

Lauren was shocked by this pronouncement. Acuzio had always been nice to her.

“Acuzio wouldn’t-“

“You should never assume a predator is your friend.” Zane said coldly. Lauren flinched. “I imagine she confronted him about her grade, and that…”

“Stop it…” Lauren whispered. Tears were welling up in her eyes. “Stop it!”

Zane fell silent.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” He said. “But I think it’s best to warn you…. I doubt that Li Zhou is still alive.”

“Just because she didn’t show up to class?” Lauren snapped. “Is that the only reason?”

“Yes.”

She jerked her head away from him and fled. He did not call after her, or make any move to stop her, as she found herself back on the street.

His theory was ridiculous. She thought to herself bitterly, as she threw himself into her room and back into her studies. Li Zhou had been smart. She would have anticipated the danger of questioning the history of the dinosaurs to one of their own. She would never have allowed herself to be left alone with one…

Or would she have? Lauren paused, pen in hand, thinking deeply. She had been very upset when they had last seen each other. Could

she have, as Zane suggested, have confronted Acuzio directly? The thought was more plausible than she had originally thought… but Lauren doubted it.

The following day, she entered her Occult Literature Class looking, she hoped, her absolute best. Galandra was sitting at her desk, and made no acknowledgement of her. Lauren climbed up to her seat and sat down. Damon, she realized sadly, was not here either.

She barely had time to fear for his safety when he came waltzing into the room.

"Hey." He said to Galandra. "What's up?"

She didn't acknowledge him. She was busy writing something with her pen. Lauren seized up as Damon leaned over towards her. He seemed about ready to say something to her, but she glanced up at him with a cold look.

"Say anything more and you will fail this class."

Damon smiled, completely unconcerned, and turned away. Lauren tried to pretend as if she hadn't been watching, but found herself completely taken aback as Damon sat right next to her, just outside the barrier.

"You may not." Galandra said coldly. "Change your seats mid semester."

"I've always been sitting here, Professor."

Galandra slammed her hand on the table and the papers went billowing around the room.

"Do you think me a fool?"

"Yes." Damon said, still smiling. "I do."

Lauren felt herself growing increasingly nervous: Galandra looked as if she could kill, but Damon was not backing down. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. If she let this continue… things would get very bad.

(Speak)

“We…. We shouldn’t fight!” She found herself saying. She gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. Galandra shot a surprised look at her, breaking eye contact with Damon.

Lauren flinched, certain that Galandra would reprimand her for becoming involved. But instead Galandra simply nodded.

“Yes, you are right, Miss Frey.” She said. “Let us begin the coursework.”

She stood up and walked to the front of the room. They spoke about that week’s story, with no further conflict. Throughout the entire thing, however, Lauren felt there was still ice in the air. Damon hadn’t moved from her side, and he was still staring at Galandra.

“That will be all.” Galandra said stiffly, before turning on her heel and walking out of the room.

“Not much for taking questions, is she?” Damon quicked, as he took Lauren’s hand. Her heart soared as she was followed him down to the bottom of the stairs.

“Well you didn’t ask.” Lauren said.

“Neither did you.”

“I… dislike asking questions.” Lauren admitted. “I…. find it uncomfortable.”

“I dislike Galandra.” Damon said. “So I suppose we’re in the same boat.”

Lauren doubted very much that she was anything like Damon. She would never have confronted Galandra the way he had just done. She was too shy.

“By the way.” He said. “That was very brave of you, standing up to her like that. She very well might have killed me.”

She blushed.

“I… couldn’t bear watching you fight.” She said. “You would get in so much trouble….”

“She would as well.” He said. “That’s the goal, honestly.”

“Huh?”

“Elves.” He said. “Have no place at this University.”

They stepped out onto the street, hand in hand. Lauren found herself troubled by this pronouncement.

“Isn’t that… prejudiced?”

“It’s reasonable.” Damon said. “She has no intention of teaching us mere mortals anything of true value. We are studying the Elven equivalent of bed time stories for children.”

“I find the stories quite charming.” Lauren said, a little bit defensively.

“And they are.” Damon said. “But Elves hold children in contempt… it is strictly forbidden among the Fae to have children. They are immortal, you see, and have no reason to reproduce. As a result, Galandra sharing these stories is her way of showing her contempt for us.”

Was that really true? Lauren thought doubtfully. Galandra wasn’t the nicest person she had met at Grey Arcadia, but she had never gotten the impression she had disrespected the very material she was teaching.

“I see that you don’t believe me.” Damon said. “That’s alright.”

She looked at him, a little bit surprised as he led her back to the Milk Bar. In another five minutes they were seated again and had ordered their drinks. Lauren had no desire to again try Memory Milk, so Damon ordered something else for her. It had a pleasant, warm taste that made her crave more.

Damon stared at her as he drank, and she found herself realizing with a start that he did not need to blink. She hadn’t noticed before, but his eyes bored into her own with an almost obsessive stare. She wasn’t sure what to make of that look. It was, she was sure, the same considering stare he had been giving Galandra.

“You don’t talk about yourself much, Lauren.” He said. She flushed, breaking eye contact away from him.

“Why would I?” Lauren asked. “I’m not interesting.”

“I certainly don’t think so.”

She could feel herself go pink. “Well, what do you find interesting about me?”

He leaned forward. His eyes, if possible, seemed to become even more focused on her.

“A girl with no background in the Dark Arts attending Grey Arcadia is a rare sight indeed.” He said. “I’m curious why you chose this particular institution.”

Lauren was sure that she had explained it to him last time. “I had no nowhere else to go.”

“You could have gotten married.” Damon said. “Or stayed with your parents.”

She pulled away from him. She felt herself go cold.

“I see that you don’t have a good relationship with your parents.” Damon said. “And yet… you seem to have turned out relatively well, all things considered.”

“What?”

“You are.” Damon said, tapping his head thoughtfully. “Passionate about your studies here, and are very responsible about your personal life. You have studied Galandra’s stories diligently every week, and I’m sure that extends to your other classes as well.”

He paused.

“What do you do after class?”

She bit her lip. She was worried that he would judge her. “I go home and study.”

“You have no friends? No boyfriend?”

“No.” Lauren said. “Never.”

She thought she saw an odd gleam in Damon’s eyes, but then it was gone.

“You are an interesting girl.” Damon said. “Different than the rest.”

“I know.” Lauren said quietly. “I hate it.”

“No.” Damon corrected her. “It is a good thing.”

“How?” Lauren asked, a little bit disparagingly. “I’m nothing like a normal person.”

“You believe normal people are good?”

Lauren gave a start and stared at him. He smiled at her knowingly.

“You give people too much credit.” He said. “You see how different they are from you and think they are your betters.”

He tilted his head towards the surrounding room. “Tell me. Do you know how the average student here behaves on their time off?”

Lauren looked around the room.

“Take those boys, for example.” Damon went on, nodding towards the other side of the room. “What are they doing?”

She turned. Four boys, dressed in plain white overalls and slacks, were sitting conversing amongst themselves. The boy in the center, who seemed to be the youngest, was staring straight ahead, unblinking. Moving only to take sips of the milk in his glass.

“Alex and his droogs.” Damon said. “Are probably getting ready for a bit of the old ultra violence.”

“The what?”

“Hellraising in its purest form.” Damon said. “Exerting your power over others just because you can.”

Lauren looked back at them, a little disconcertedly, as the boys slowly stood up. They stepped across the room, in perfect unison. They passed by another couple at a table and turned on them, turning the table over with a sickening crash, causing the lady to hiss, the cat like ears on her head folded back, while the man got to his feet and drew a sword.

“Watch yourself.” Damon advised her, as he raised his drink to his lips. Lauren looked back frightfully, and thinking of nothing else to

do she found herself moving closer to him.

The Droogs, as Damon had called them, seemed to have almost bitten off more than they could chew. The man with the sword leapt forward and slashed one of them across the chest. The droog screamed, but grabbed the blade with his bare hands, causing the man to struggle to pull it away. A second droog came running up with a chair, and slammed it across his head. The girl, who Lauren thought was either a Witch or a Beastman, lunged at this droog and clawed his eyes, scratching them with deep claws.

A ghost appeared, looking unamused.

"There will be no violence in this establishment." He drawled. "Those who do not comply will be shot on the spot…"

One of the droogs raised his hands and formed a symbol. The ghost's eyes widened in fear.

The ghost let out an unearthly shriek, and exploded into a shining burst of light that enveloped the entire room. Even those that had not been watching the fight, which there had been surprisingly many, had to cover their eyes.

The back door to the Bar burst open.

"That was your final warning!"

Lauren screamed as a gun went off. One of the droogies ducked, his hat blown off his head and falling right on top of one of the female head of the table just behind him.

"Droogies, I believe we are not wanted." The boy named Alex called out jovially, twisting his hat around his fingers.

The gun went off again, but this time the droogie raised his hand and the bullets darted away from him, slamming into walls and ceilings and causing more people to panic.

Two of the droogies made a beeline for the man with the gun, and managed to grab hold of it. They beat him senseless with their legs and feet until the man relinquished the weapon, and then ripped it from his grasp. The man fell to the floor, gasping for breath, as the

gun was handed off to a single droogie, while the rest beat on the hapless man.

“Does any moodge here have the balls to pick a spar with us?” The droogie asked, as he peered around at the crowd. The man and girl who had been attacked lay stunned on the ground, seemingly knowing they had been outmatched. Not a single person moved.

Lauren clutched Damon’s arm in fear. She was surprised to see that he looked relaxed, almost as if he was enjoying himself. She couldn’t understand why he was so calm.

“How about you?”

The man pointed the gun at an older gentleman dressed in a top hat and tuxedo. The man shook his head.

“You?”

An Indian man, who was sitting cross legged on the couch with a giant basket at his feet, also shook his head. The droog cast a look down at the basket, and kicked it.

The lid popped open, and the snake within lashed out and clamped its jaws onto the droog’s arm. He screamed out in pain as the snake fell back into the basket, and the man quickly placed the lid back on top of it.

“Why you-“ The Droog raised his arm, clearly intending to smash the basket with his fist.

Lauren cried out as Damon stood up. He threw his glass, still half full of milk, at the back of that droogie’s head. The glass shattered as it slammed into the back of his head, and he reeled, bending his head forward from the impact.

He turned around, eyes glaring, at Damon.

“My apologies.” Damon said quietly to Lauren. “I rather like snakes.”

“So here we have our challenger.” The Droog said. The other droogies, who had seemingly beaten the store manager into unconsciousness, straightened their clothes and hair as the droog

with the gun skipped up to Damon, his shoes clicking oddly against the floor. He seemed very confident and sure of himself.

"And he has a lovely devotchka with him too!" The Droog crowed, as he cast a look down at Lauren. "How does a little bit of the ol' in out in out sound to you, my love?" He raised the gun and pointed it squarely at Damon's chest.

Damon raised his hand and placed his fingers into the barrel of the gun.

"Where are your manners?" Damon asked silkily, as he twisted his fingers into the metal. "Is that any way to talk to a lady?"

The Droog, still smiling, pulled the trigger. His smile turned to shock when the weapon exploded in his grip, sending shrapnel flying back into his face, piercing his eyes, neck, chest, and forehead. Lauren screamed as the Droogie staggered backward, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

Damon raised his fingers to the sky as the Droog fell backwards onto the ground, to the shock of his fellows.

"He was dead anyway." He said disparagingly. "That was an Indian Cobra. The venom would have killed him."

The remaining three droogs drew their own weapons, knives mostly, and advanced on them.

Damon cast a look behind at Lauren. She was staring up at him wide eyed and fearful.

"This isn't going to be romantic." He said quietly. "Turn your eyes away, please."

She could not bring herself to do it. She watched as Damon stepped forward, hands in his pockets, and glowered.

"This is your one chance." He said. "To walk away and raise hell another day."

Lauren's heart was racing. Damon… Damon could die, right here in front of her eyes. She would never see him again…. And to her, that sounded like the most horrible thing in the world.

The three boys jumped at him. One opened his mouth wide to let out a scream, but it turned into a gurgle as Damon thrust his thumb into it, and jerked his arm downward. The boy slammed head first into the ground, seemingly splitting his head in two with a sickening CRACK.

He whirled on the other two, and they raised their knives and charged. Both pieces of steel penetrated his skin, and they laughed with glee as they moved the hilt, clearly intending to slice him open.

But nothing happened. Confused, they pulled the blades away and stared. The sharp metal had seemingly completely melted into a gooey liquid.

"I think you'll find me a greater threat than the average passerby on the street." Damon said. The two Droogs backed away, and for the first time Lauren could see that they were afraid.

Damon tilted his head, seemingly considering his next move, before he turned around and walked back to Lauren.

"Let's go." He told her. She was so taken aback that she didn't move right away. He bent over and grabbed her arm and she let out a yelp as she was dragged to her feet.

"Sorry." He said quietly, as he pulled her out of the bar. "But it's not safe for you here."

A number of onlookers had gathered on the street outside the door, seemingly anticipating a brawl. There was a quiet hiss of disappointment from them as Damon led Lauren down the steps and into the street.

"Come on where is the BLOOD?" A large, burly bearded man complained.

"Inside." Damon snapped. He took Lauren and pulled her away.

"Have a nice night you two!" A girl cackled. Lauren blushed, turning her head downward.

"I'm sorry you had to see that." Damon said quietly. "They usually go elsewhere for their Hellraising." He sounded exceptionally bitter.

“That’s Hellraising?” Lauren said quietly. “Just… senseless violence?”

“Not senseless.” Damon corrected her. “Violence is how we establish our social hierarchy. The strongest rule.”

Lauren fell silent. She wasn’t sure how to put her feelings into words. She was horrified, to be certain, but a part of her felt a strange sort of admiration, and longing.

“You were cool out there.”

Damon didn’t respond to this. Lauren rather felt like she had said something wrong, and was nearly about to apologize.

“Perhaps.” Damon said quietly. “We should go elsewhere for our meeting next week.”

“Can it be sooner?”

She stopped, horrified at herself. Damon walked several steps ahead of her before turning around to face her.

“Of course.” He said. “I would be delighted.”

They stared at each other for a moment. Lauren found that she couldn’t tear her eyes away from his. He stepped towards her and wrapped his fingers around hers. She knew what was coming, and the anxiety overtook her completely.

She turned her head and pulled away.

“I’ll… see you…” She murmured. She untangled her fingers from his and backed away. She didn’t quite meet his eyes again as she turned around and quickly walked away.

She was still anxious when she entered her room and threw herself on her bed, without even removing her shoes. She thrust her face into a pillow and let out a cry.

(Congratulations, you’re well on your way to having your first kiss.) Camila said, sounding amused. Lauren could feel her hand patting her back.

“There’s no way.” Lauren said. “There’s no way someone like that could want anything to do with someone like me-“

(You've agreed to date number three and you still think that?)

Lauren didn't raise her head from her pillow. She lay, deep in her own thoughts. Why had she panicked? Why had she run away? She had been so happy, but why…?

"I don't deserve to be happy." Lauren said aloud, as she flipped over on her back. She stared up at the ceiling and thought about her life up until this point.

(You mustn't think that!) Camila snapped, causing her to jump. (Lauren, this is why you're here, isn't it? To find your own happiness? To say that you don't deserve that is… that's exactly what our parents want!)

Lauren looked up from the pillow, her eye wide.

(They didn't want you to come to Grey Arcadia.) Camila said, her voice gentle. (Because they knew that once you found a way to get away from them that you would never come back.)

Lauren sat up. She had not turned on the light in her room again. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at her legs.

(They pushed you to do more than just ignore school.) Camila said. (They didn't want you to have friends or boyfriends at all… didn't they?)

Lauren closed her eyes.

"That's right."

(Lauren.) Camilla said gently. (You're still approaching these kinds of things as if your parents can still punish you for it.)

Lauren sighed.

"That's not it." She said. "I'm not-"

(You are.) Camilla said. (You allowed them to prevent you from doing well in school when you were still living with them, and you've convinced yourself that it isn't a good thing for you to be in love.)

In… love…?

(Lauren, you need to pursue the things that make you happy, regardless of what other people think.) Camila said. (You need to embrace what you want.)

"I can't do that." Lauren said. "It's hard enough going to school, I can't… I can't… I can't fall in love now!"

(You can, and you will. And you should.) Camila said. (Your lover should, I think, put your needs above all else.)

"Do you…" Lauren bit her lip. "Think he will?"

She paced around the room, rubbing her face anxiously.

(You won't know unless you try.)

Lauren stopped. Her heart was racing in her chest.

"Okay." She said. "I'll do it."

She clenched her fists and did an odd little hop. "Next time I see him… I'll…. I'll kiss him!"

(The first kiss is the most magical, they say) Camila said. (Try not to panic next time, okay?)

Lauren felt herself calm down. She spent all night thinking about her Damon, kicking around ideas as to what she would wear and say to him. She was still walking on air by the time she left for class in the morning. Once she was out in public, though, that feeling quickly evaporated.

"Hello, Lauren." Ellie said warmly, as she sat down next to them. "Are you doing well?"

"Yes."

"That's good." Ellie hummed. Alriya was thumping her pen against the desk in silence. She was not looking at them. Lauren rather thought she was angry at them, before Ellie explained the situation.

"She lost her voice during her Military Magic class." Ellie said. "A witch cursed her."

"Really?" Lauren asked, alarmed, as she turned to face her. "Why?"

Alriya had a little dry erase board in front of her. She took a marker and quickly wrote a sentence and held it up.

“They wanted your tongue?” Lauren asked, disgusted.

“They taste nice.” Alriya wrote out. Lauren blanched.

Their lesson went relatively smoothly. Alriya, Lauren, and Ellie found themselves walking out of the building again.

“When will your voice come back, Alriya?”

Alriya scribbled something and held it up. “Soon.”

“I hope so.” Lauren said. “I don’t like being the second quietest person in class.”

The two of them stared at her. Lauren thought she had accidently said something very offensive when suddenly Ellie broke out laughing, and Alriya smiled widely at her.

They went their separate ways and Lauren found herself back at the hall of Music. She was deep in thought as she worked.

She had done more than found a potential boyfriend. She was beginning to feel as if Ellie and Alriya could… possibly… want to be her friend. The thought rejuvenated her. That feeling stayed with her until she set out for her Magic 101 class the next day.

“Lauren!”

She was walking up to the Magic 101 building when she heard someone call her name. She turned around to find Emilia racing up to her, smiling widely.

“It’s been a while!” She said brightly. Lauren stared at her.

“Oh.” She said. “Where were you last week?”

Emilia’s smile faded.

“There was a full moon last week.” She said. She jolted her thumb upwards. “And I’m completely out of control whenever that happens, so….”

She shook her head. She seemed to not want to discuss the matter further. Lauren, however, found herself interested.

“Does the school know?”

“Oh, of course.” Emilia said, immediately. I’m not the only werewolf on Campus… plenty of us here can only go out at certain times of day, or during certain times of the year… the University will work with you about it. In my case…” She flashed an embarrassed smile. “I’m supposed to have a designate someone to give me notes and assignments on my off days.”

Pippin had said something of the sort the week before.

“I had meant to ask you to do it.” Emilia went on. “But it completely slipped my mind.”

They entered the class together. Pippin greeted them cordially.

“Wonderful to see you back with us, Emilia.” Pippin said. “How was your sabbatical?”

“Painful and exhausting.” Emilia told her. “I’m still not used to being on foreign territory yet. I kept getting jumped all night.”

“By who?”

“Centaurs, mostly.” Emilia said, letting out a yawn. “And some of those Orthodox Satyrs… not to mention the occasional Knight of the Dragon.” She stopped, as if she had said something she shouldn’t have. “But why so curious?”

“No particular reason.” Pippin said. “But I must ask you… I assumed Lauren Frey was your designee. Did you choose someone else, or…?”

“I wanted Lauren to do it.” Emilia admitted. “But I…”

She cast a look at Lauren doubtfully.

“I’ll do it.” Lauren said. “You don’t have to worry about a thing, Emilia. Just be sure to remind me whenever the full moon is coming up, alright?”

“Well that settles it.” Pippin said. “I expect nothing but the best from both of you.”

Emilia and Lauren thanked her and sat down.

“She’s really very nice.” Lauren commented. She had not expected that from her, considering her appearance. But Emilia shook her head.

“No, I don’t think so.” She said. “She’s watching me.”

“What?”

“Fenrir Werewolves.” She said. “Are extremely dangerous. Especially one with my background and training. Doubtless she thinks of me as a threat…”

Lauren was taken aback. She had not thought there was any tension between Pippin and Emilia at all. They had both been very polite to each other, not at all like the aggressive arguments in her Political Evils class, or the clash of personalities between Damon and Galandra.

“Why would you think that?” Lauren asked.

“Witches hate and fear us.” Emilia said. “Because we’re more in tune with our animalistic instincts. We’re much more of a threat to them than ordinary people.”

Despite her words, Emilia did not seem particularly hostile or aggressive. She was, if anything, rather relaxed throughout the lecture. When class concluded, they stood up just as they always had and made their way to the door.

“Oh yeah.” Emilia said. “You’re going to be my designee from now on… right?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ll have to bring notes and assignments to my place.” Emilia said.

“On the day of the full moon?”

“Oh, I won’t be there.” Emilia said immediately. “You won’t have to worry about that… I have a mail slot on my door, just slide it through there. I’ll come show you.”

Lauren felt herself feeling extremely nervous walking along the streets with Emilia. She liked her just fine… more than most people, in fact. But the more she learned about her the more she began to appreciate just how radically different they were.

Whenever Lauren walked the streets of Grey Arcadia alone, she drew the attention of seemingly everyone she came across. Cats would try to speak with her, vampires with follow along with her movements with her eyes, and beastmen would bare their fangs at her.

But now that she was with Emilia none of that happened. People gave them a wide berth and averted their eyes as they walked. They seemed almost frightened.

"This is it." Emilia declared, as they came to a stop outside a large house. "We own it." She explained, noting Lauren's puzzled look. "Since no one wants to room with us, it's better to live with people just like you."

She showed her where the mail box slot was, and before she knew it Lauren was sitting on the porch, sipping iced Coke and watching the passerby.

"You're the first person I've had over." Emilia complained, leaning back into the chair. "Other than other Fenrir, anyway."

"There are other people here?"

"A fair few." Emilia answered. "Not all of them students."

"I wouldn't want to live with a bunch of people." Lauren said. She had her little room all to herself, but it often felt like The Master didn't truly live in the Hall of Music at all. For most people it would be a little too lonely, but Lauren deeply loved it, and wouldn't want to leave for anything.

"Yeah, you're the antisocial type." Emilia said. "Do you not like other people?"

"I do." Lauren said quietly, as they watched a crow dive down onto a gold coin on the ground and snatched it into its beak. "But it's… kind

of hard for me to make friends."

"I can imagine." Emilia said, laughing, as she took a sip of her own drink. "But we're friends now, right?"

"I suppose we are." Lauren said quietly. She wasn't sure how true that was. She doubted they would see each other again when the semester ended. But until that happened… yes. They were friends.

She didn't stay long. She said her goodbyes and made her way back to the Hall of Music. The week was now over. She thought with relief, as she stepped into the Hall. She rather thought that she would walk straight to her room and organize her things for the following week.

What she didn't expect was that Damon would be sitting in the Hall of Music when she came in. She stopped in the doorway, staring at the back of his head. He turned around and smiled. She approached him.

"Sit down." He told her. She did so. They sat and listened to the Master play Bach.

"How did you find this place?" She asked him.

"You invited me." He told her. "Remember?"

She did not. She would have remembered if she had. She had never, in her life, invited a boy over to do anything. Not only did she not have the confidence, there had been no one to even ask.

"This place is quite famous." Damon remarked. "I regret that this is my first visit here. The music is superb."

"You may come by whenever you want." Lauren told him. "The Master accepts all who love music."

"Yes, perhaps I may."

They sat in relative, content silence. Lauren marveled at how natural it felt. Although they weren't deep in conversation, she felt a sense of belonging that she hadn't felt since meeting Ophelia.

That feeling… there was nothing else like it.

“I’m glad I saw you.” Damon told her. “I wanted to take you somewhere this weekend.”

Her heart fluttered.

“You did?”

“I did.” He affirmed. “My friends are I are holding a little ceremony. We would be honored if you would attend.”

She didn’t like the idea of meeting his friends, especially so soon. “I don’t know…” She murmured. “I don’t… like being around people…”

“You were reluctant to talk to me when we first me.” Damon said. “And look at us now.”

That was all she needed to hear. She agreed.

“You live here.” Damon said. “So I will come and get you tomorrow night. Please be prepared.”

“I will.” Lauren told him.

She found herself anxious, but excited. Damon was right, she told herself, as she got to work cleaning the hall. She had been reluctant that first time. But after it was over, she had had the time of her life. That feeling… she would do everything in her power to feel like that every day.

Following the completion of her chores, she dedicated the rest of her evening for preparing. Most of her clothes, she realized in horror, all looked essentially identical. She had picked them out for the intent of attending classes and nothing else. There was nothing, she thought, that looked particularly nice.

(You have time to pick out something new)

“I… don’t want to go shopping!” Lauren replied, horrified, as she tried to rationalize what she should do next. “I…. have no idea where to even start…!”

(Should have been prepared) Camilia said smugly. Lauren let out a cry and threw herself onto her bed.

She had to make do with what she had. She got out one of her drab, dark blue school things and did her best to smooth out the wrinkles with her fingers in order to make them look brand new.

(You could just BUY something, you know…)

Lauren shook her head.

(Your funeral.) Camila said lazily. (You have to put effort into your relationships if you want them to work, you know?)

"I am putting in effort." Lauren said. "A part of me doesn't want to go at all, and yet-"

(You do want to go.) Camila said, her voice sharp. (Just like you want a nice, new dress)

Lauren closed her eyes and sighed.

"If I try to do too much…. I'll break down." She confessed. "I…. I'm scared."

She felt Camila's arms wrap around her.

(You're the bravest person I know.) Camila said gently.

She had not spent an entire day in the Hall of Music since she had first begun living here. She sat, listening to the Master's Music, awaiting his arrival. One of the Old Witches who always smiled and greeted her, gave her a concerned look.

"Is something the matter, sweetie?"

Lauren was surprised.

"No… not at all." She said. "I'm just… waiting for someone. That's all."

"You look very tense." The witch said. "Who is this person?"

Lauren opened her mouth to reply, but Damon's hand fell on her shoulder.

"Me."

The old lady smiled up at him.

“Oh, it was a boy.” She said. “That explains everything.” She winked at Lauren and then went back to her needlework.

Damon took her hand and pulled her to her feet. They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment. Lauren shocked herself by being the first to speak.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Someplace very special to me.” He said. “You will understand once we arrive.”

He led her to the door and out into the street.

“But I still understand so little about you.” She said. “We’ve talked so little I… don’t know what to expect.”

“One can never truly know another.” He told her. She wrinkled her nose, into a kind of pout.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“But I want to.”

He stopped and looked at her. He was smiling. She did too.

Much like they had with Emilia, the crowds on the streets parted as they walked. Lauren felt a strange sense of pride: No one had ever taken notice of her in this way before. It gave her a strange sense of status and power, one that she had never had felt before.

She had hardly ever gone into Hellraiser territory. Most of the creatures and people that were walking by were far more terrifying than anything she had seen from the Noctis. A man whose skin seemed to have completely molded off of his skull sat on the corner. Brains encased in Jars sat in front of him on the sidewalk. A beastman, dressed in a beautiful white jacket and wide spectacles, stopped to converse with him.

“These are… human brains?”

“Some of them.”

A large, bird dropped from the sky and tried to grab the brain in its clutches. Both the Beastman and the Skull beat them back, shouting wildly.

Large, round eyes were embedded into every door Lauren could see, from the stores to the restaurants to the legal consultation agencies. They flickered and moved as if they were alive, following the movements of everyone who came close to them.

They passed by a pet store. Rather than ordinary housecats frolicking around in the window, the window showed the dissonant image of a giant tiger playing with a ball in a beautiful, large pool of water. Lauren stopped to look at it, admiring its beauty. Damon noticed her interest.

"The window is enchanted." He said. "It's difficult to keep tigers in stores, so they raise them in compounds in the country and then bring them in if a customer is interested."

"Who would want a tiger?" Lauren asked, startled.

"You would." Damon said. Lauren looked at him, shocked, before laughing.

"I have no place to keep a tiger." She said. "I doubt the Master would allow me to keep a pet."

"You could have it guard the premises."

He led her away from the pet store before she could respond. Her mind was reeling. She had never thought about owning a tiger. The idea was ridiculous, absurd. And yet somehow Damon had made her feel, for a moment, like it could very much be possible…

"This is it." He said.

They came to a stop in front of something that looked very much like a Church, or a Cathedral. Giant, demonic looking statues leered down at them from above, and giant marble pillars rose on either side of the grand staircase.

"What… is this place?"

Damon gripped her more tightly.

He led her up the great staircase, and she found herself marveling at the sheer size and beauty of them. They stretched before her on either side, so wide and grand that several couples could climb the stairs at once. She had admired the architecture of Grey Arcadia before, but she now she found herself curious about her.

“Are these gargoyles? Living ones, I mean?”

“Of course.” He answered. But he said nothing more.

They approached the door to the grand building and Damon raised his hand and pushed it open. The door was so big and heavy that Lauren was sure that it would not move an inch, but it moved effortlessly.

They stepped inside into a wide, spacious hall. It was completely white in color, and nearly empty. There was nothing other than the stained glass windows on either side, very near the ceiling. The artwork was technically sound, but she was used to seeing windows of that kind be warm and inviting. These looked somehow dark and sinister.

Damon led her down the long, white hallway, his grip tight on her arm. She stared up at the grinning faces and dark colors above her and marveled at how the room seemed to be getting progressively smaller, and darker.

By the time they reached the end of the hallway the room was pitch black. They could see nothing other than the door in front of their faces. Damon did nothing this time. Instead the doors swung open, of their own accord.

“After you.” Damon offered, as he released her hand.

There were a number of brightly lit torches on either side of the hallway, but they emitted very little light. Lauren stepped forward awkwardly into the room, looking around and waiting for Damon to come in behind her.

She was surprised when the doors swung shut behind her.

She whirled, eyes wide at the large square doors. There were no handles. She went back to it and pushed her body weight against it, crying out.

"Damon!" She called. "Damon? Let me out! Please!" She waited with bated breath, pressing her ear against the door, hoping to catch some kind of sign, or receive some kind of instruction on what to do next.

There was nothing. Only silence.

Lauren stood there for several minutes, panic overtaking her. She had not at all been frightened when she had been with Damon. She knew that he could take care of her. But now that she was alone, in some strange place that she knew nothing about….

(Calm down.) Camila instructed. (Lauren, you need to forget about him and get out of here.)

"The door's shut!"

(There must be another way) Camila said. (Look at the torches)

Lauren turned, shaking, and looked at the torches, two lines of them, running parallel in front of her.

(The room may be pitch dark.) Camila said. (But clearly you're meant to follow the torches.)

"Meant?" Lauren squeaked. "By who?"

Camila did not answer. She did not seem to have one. Swallowing, Lauren stepped forward, one tender foot in front of the other. She half expected a bat or a beastman to come lunging out of the shadows. With each tentative step she could sense an impending sense of doom and despair, that her next step would be her last.

The rows of torches went on for a very long time. With every step she took, she felt herself becoming more and more at ease with her surroundings. It was too quiet to be a danger to her. Surely… there was nothing here.

And then they came to a set of stairs. They were not the sort of stairs that would lead to another floor, but were more like the ones

that you would climb to enter a patio or a building.

(This doesn't seem right.) Camila was saying, as Lauren took her first tentative step. (Be wary.)

Although Lauren took her advice to heart, she did not stop. She felt that if she did, she wouldn't move again. She kept moving, forward and upward, until she stepped onto a sort of circular dais, and stopped. The torches behind her immediately flickered and died. The room was cast in complete darkness.

And then there was light.

From every direction in the room, as far as she could see stood people, covering their bodies and faces with black robes and hoods. They stood in complete silence, staring up at her with a sort of empty stare. They had appeared seemingly as if out of thin air.

Lauren screamed. She fell to the ground, stumbling over herself, and stared out in horror over the sea of black in front of her. There must have been, at the very least, a thousand of them. Packed shoulder to shoulder in this large, empty room.

"The Virgin Offering." A cold, chill, voice spoke. "Has arrived."

Lauren froze. Her mind was reeling as a tall, rather feeble looking old man, toothless and bald, stepped around her Dais, into her line of sight. She looked to her other side, and an old woman was following his movement.

They circled her for a moment, turned to face her, and then stopped.

A flash of light surrounded her. It was the same kind of light that Galandra used to restrain her students. Lauren reached out, trying to reach out over the dais, but found herself pressing against thin air. There was no escape.

"And who is making the offering?" The woman spoke.

The doors at the end of the room opened. Lauren watched, horrified, as a black robed Christopher Damon walked along the beautiful blood red carpet, staring right her. He stepped about ten feet away and kneeled.

“I do.” He said. His voice reverberated throughout the room. Loud, clear, and firm.

“Christopher Damon.” The Man and Woman spoke at once. “If the Master Accepts Your Offering, you will become something more than human. If not… your life will be forfeit. Do you wish to proceed?”

“I do.”

“Then we shall begin.”

Lauren lay, open mouthed, as the man and woman raised their hands upward.

“Great Serpent!” They cried, in unison. “Rise!”

Lauren felt an intense heat on her back. She turned, mouth agape, and noticed for the first time that a monstrous statue stood behind her. It resembled a beastman in the sense that it seemed to possess both human and animalistic qualities, but its jaw was oddly slack, wide open and agape in seemingly an endless scream. But it was difficult to make out any further features, as intense flames were bursting out of the statues eyes and mouth, partially blinding her.

A loud shriek filled the air, and an enormous serpentine creature formed from the flames. It had no arms or other limbs to speak of, only a long, lithe body. Waves of heat began to fill the room as the serpentine creature and began to circle the dias where Lauren was laying. The heat it was emitting was unbearable. Lauren found herself sweating profusely as its body began to slowly enclose around her.

“Great Serpent!” The two cried. “Your Servant Christopher Damon offers you a virgin sacrifice!"

Lauren flinched as the great serpent circled her, its round, red eye fixed squarely on her, taking in every feature. It came to a stop and rose to its full height, reaching about halfway to the ceiling. It bent its head towards Damon.

“The offering has been accepted!” The two Hellraisers cried, and the crowd raised their hands in unison, although they made no noise.

“Here, her life shall end, and yours, Brother Damon, will burn forevermore!”

Lauren couldn’t move. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t react. She had completely shut down. This was her just reward. This was what her parents had tried to warn her away from. She had blindly fallen in with the wrong crowd, due to her own stupidity, and now had to reap the reward.

“Thank you, Master.” Damon said. “This Virgin girl will be the first of my many gifts to you.”

(This is it)

The barrier around her was lifted. She hardly noticed, and did not even consider running away. The heat coming from the serpent became even more unbearable. She coughed and closed her eyes. She felt that if she opened them, they would burn right out of her skull.

(I’m dead)

The serpent circled her, wrapping its long, circular body around the dias.

(I can’t)

It raised its head and opened its maw wide, showing rows and rows of teeth, that seemed to be made of nothing but flame.

(I can’t)

The Beast began to lower its head down to her.

(I can’t let you!)

Lauren could feel the heat descending onto her. She could feel her body sweating.

(I don’t want to die!)

But there was nothing she could do.

Deep within her, a voice began to grow. Louder and louder. Lauren felt herself seizing up, accepting her fate and wanting it to just be

over already. But the voice continued getting louder and louder, until…

(Lauren!)

Lauren's eyes widened. Her hands fell flat at her sides, pressing her palms against the floor. She stared at the dais and the serpent. She could see Damon, through the somewhat transparent form of the fiery serpent. She smiled.

She raised her hands to her mouth, and then laughed.

The great serpent stopped its descent. It seemed to be puzzled at her reaction. Lauren seemed to be keeping her snickers down to a minimum, but then broke out into raucous laughter. The heat still very much bothered her, to be sure… but it would be over soon.

Damon looked at her, dumbfounded, as the two old Hellraisers watched her in amazement. It was clear that they had never seen a sacrifice behave this way.

"Damon." Lauren found herself saying, chuckling a little. "Damon Damon Damon. Did you really… Did you REALLY…" She broke out into even more intense laughter. "Just ASSUME that I was a virgin?"

A chill fell through the air. There was complete silence. The Serpent, as if shocked by this unexpected pronouncement, reared its head back and considered Damon carefully. She could see that she completely threw him for a loop. For the very first time she had ever seen him, he looked completely out of his element.

"You are." Damon said, his voice a little restrained. He hesitated. "Aren't you?"

"I told you that I never had a boyfriend." Lauren found herself saying. "I didn't say that I didn't have a lot of sex. With everyone that I possibly could." She stood up, and although the heat had died down significantly, pulled her top up and over her head. She threw it into the fire and let out a jubilant laugh at Damon's shocked expression.

“It was rough, on poor old mom and dad.” She said. “Having to throw out a completely different guy every weekend…. But now that I’m in college, they don’t have to worry about me living life to the fullest and embracing my wild side. You know?”

Damon had gone as white as a sheet. The serpent over her pulled away, staring down at him abrasively. It looked positively furious.

“This was the worst date I’ve ever been on.” Lauren said coldly, hands on her hips. “But at least I got to humiliate you in front of your cult. Good bye.”

She made her way to the serpent and gestured for it to move. It stared at her for a moment, as if trying to decide what to do, before taking back off into the air and allowing her to leave. It circled the dais above her as she stepped off the dais.

The entire crowd watched her, transfixed, as she confidently made her way across the way. When she was ten steps away she heard Damon came after her. He felt to his knees and grabbed her skirt. She turned around and glared at him.

“Lauren…” Damon said. His voice sounded rather shaky. “You’re…. you’re joking…. Right?”

“First of all.” She said, her voice ice cold. “My name is Camila. You really should have known that by now. And second of all…”

She raised her foot and slammed it into his face. He cried out and fell onto his back, sprawling out on the red carpet.

“Don’t touch girls without their permission.” She said, as she straightened out her skirt. “Especially when you don’t even know their names.”

She turned back around and walked back to the open doors. Camila barely registered the fierce, furious shriek from the Great Serpent descended upon Damon. Damon cried out in fear as the great serpent slammed into him, exploding into bright red and gold fire that consumed him so completely that there was not even ash left.

The whole building was engulfed in flame by the time that Camila stepped through the door to the street, smiling to herself.

"Well that was an adventure." She drawled, as she brushed her hair out of her face. Behind her the giant, beautiful cathedral that she had admired as Lauren Frey had completely caught fire. Many of the Hellraisers stopped to point and laugh. Many shouted obscenities at the Great Serpent, and his followers.

Camila ignored them all and made her way through the dark streets of Grey Arcadia. She hummed to herself as she enjoyed the night air. It seemed, at long last, that they were at peace.

(Camila?) An anxious voice filled her subconcious. (What… What's happening?)

"I don't know." Camila said cheerfully, as she began to skip, rather like a school child. "I feel as if I could sing!"

Lauren had never realized this, due to her own shut in nature, but Grey Arcadia was a university where practically every store was open twenty four hours a day. Camila found herself entering a take out restaurant, ordering some ramen, and eating out on the steps of another building, watching people go by.

"There's so much going on here." Camila said enthusiastically, eyeing the passerby. As she ate, however, she began to reflect more on what had just occurred. She had no idea what to make of the night's events, and she personally did not care very much. But one thing did concern her.

"Lauren, are you alright?" She asked, a little bit more somberly. She bit into the noodles and slurped.

(I… am.) Lauren said, apprehensively. (I'm…. still in shock. That's all.)

"You became catonic, I think." Camila said. "You were completely limp and unresponsive, and then…"

She faltered. She stared at her own hand, as if unable to believe it was still there. She twisted it, moved her fingers, and inspected her

skin.

"I saved you." She said. "Somehow I… took over."

She stared at her hand again, trying to get over the shook of it all. She shook her head wildly and then returned to her food.

"But you're still here." She said, as she finished eating and set the bowl aside. "We're both still here." She corrected herself.

(I… am.) Lauren acknowledged. She was still clearly a little rattled. (But… How? I don't…)

"Magic, maybe?" Camila suggested. "Or… dissociative personality disorder?"

(…Perhaps.)

She seemed unwilling to talk more. She seemed depressed.

"I'm your friend, Lauren." Camila said, as she got to her feet. "I'll always be here for you, no matter what." She glanced around the street. Although she personally wanted nothing more than to go gallivanting around Grey Arcadia, she knew that she had to keep Lauren's feelings in mind too. Perhaps if she returned to the Hall of Music, Lauren would feel a little bit more comfortable with the situation.

She made her way back, and opened the door to the Hall of Music. The crowd was thin, tonight. So thin that hardly anyone was in the room.

The Master stopped playing as she entered. He turned his head to glance at her, as if unable to believe what he was seeing.

(You.) The Master rasped. (Are not Lauren Frey.)

"I'm not." Camila said casually, hand on her hip. "I'm her closest friend."

(You are not welcome.) The Master rasped. (Leave.) Camila frowned, but before she could say anything Lauren intervened.

(Master…) Lauren said, her voice quiet. (I think…. She IS me….)

The Master looked at them, through heavy eyelids. He closed them and bent his head, and then returned to his playing.

Camila entered the drab, impersonal room of Lauren Frey and sat down on the bed.

"Well Lauren." She said aloud, bringing her legs up to her chest. "I'm sure there have been worse third dates."

Silence. Clearly Lauren did not find the remark funny.

"Look, Lauren." She said. "I know you liked him, and thought that he was really into you, and that he really, really cared about you… but you have to accept the fact that he only wanted to use you as a human sacrifice. Don't be so hung up on him, okay?"

Still no response.

"I'm glad he's dead." Camila said, more to herself than to Lauren. "After what he did to you…"

She sighed, shaking her head and leaning back on the bed. She crossed her legs and stared up at the ceiling.

(Or is it… did to us?) Lauren approached the question cautiously.

"Who knows?" Camila said. "I liked him too, but I can forget him just as easily." She yawned. Now that she was lying down, she felt as if she could fall asleep right here.

(I'm tired too.) Lauren admitted. Camila closed her eyes and leaned back, falling into a deep sleep.

The End

Thank you all for reading my Fourth published Novel, Lauren Frey. If you enjoyed this book please give it a rating and review. Thank you all! You all are the reason I keep working!

Lauren Frey's Adventures in Grey Arcadia will continue, so I hope you continue to read and enjoy her books!